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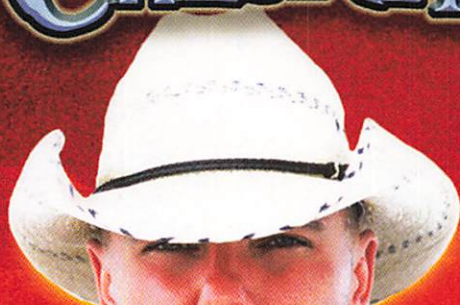
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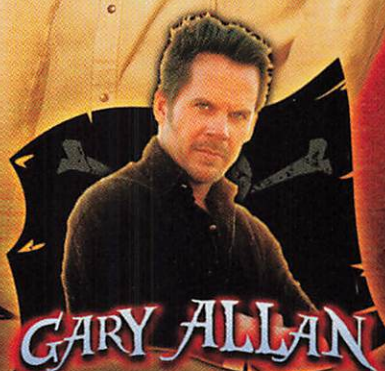
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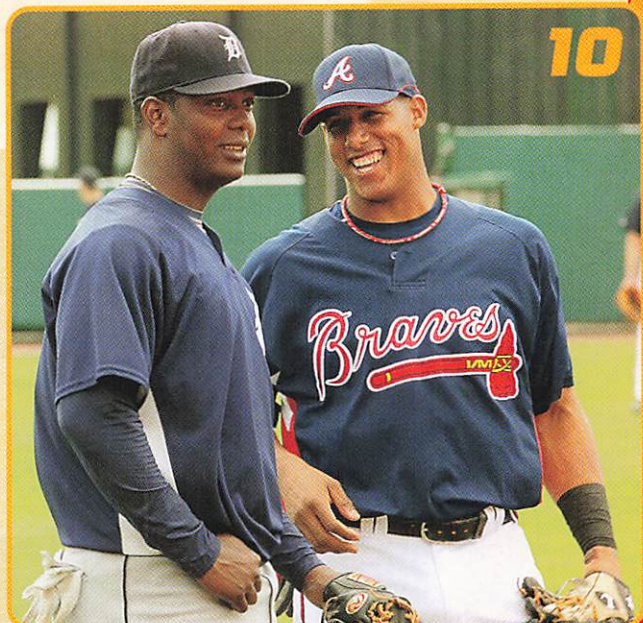
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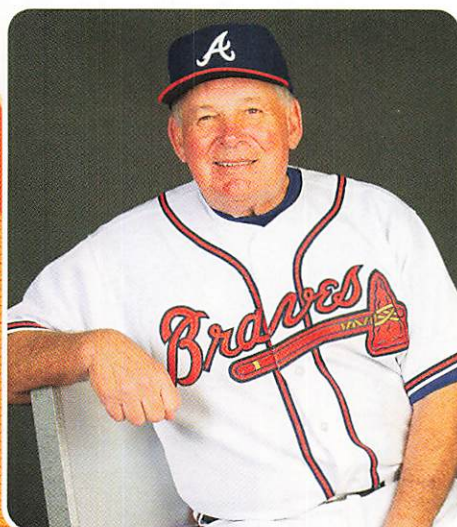
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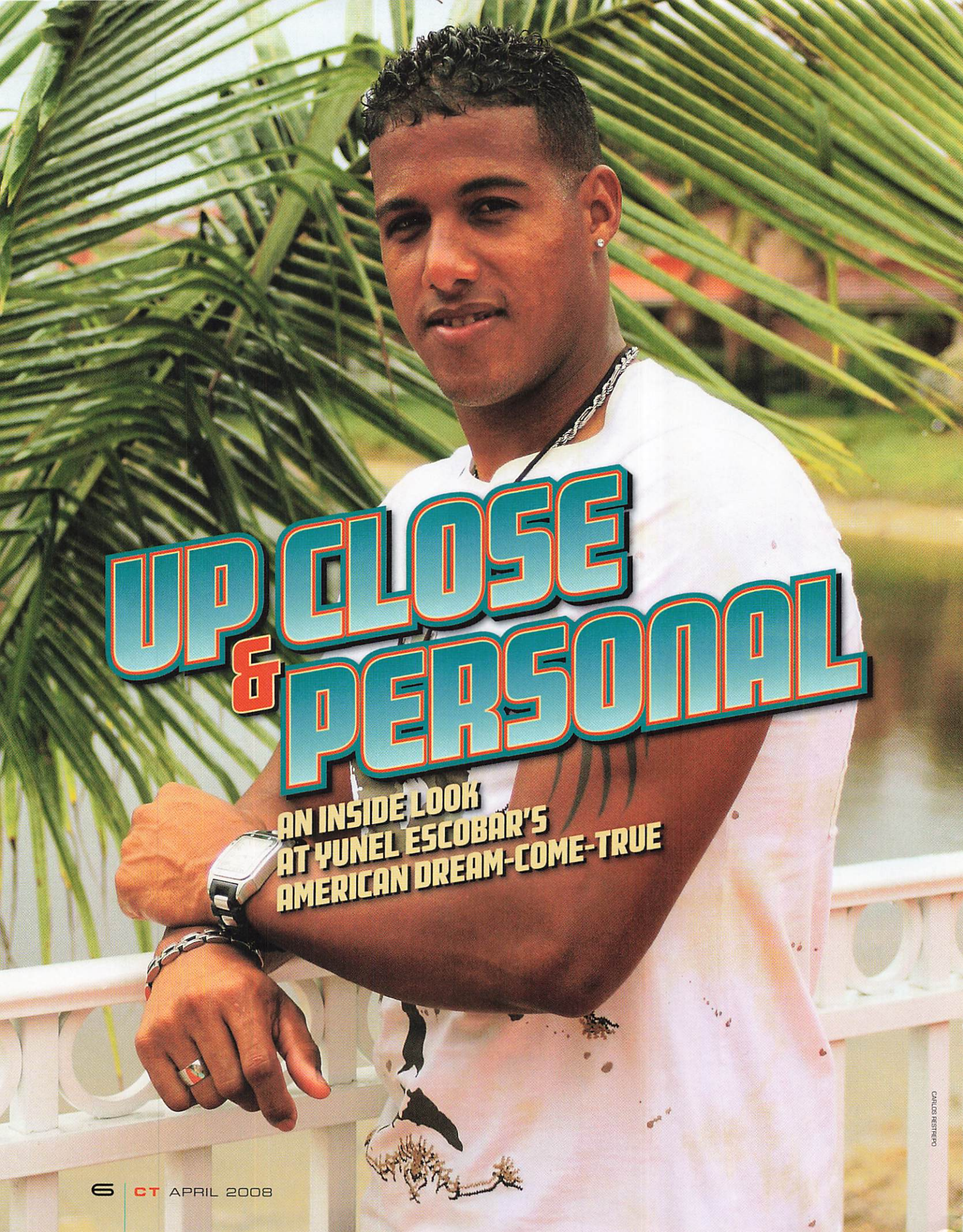
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UP & CLOSE PERSONAL

AN INSIDE LOOK
AT YONEL ESCOBAR'S
AMERICAN DREAM-COME-TRUE

IF YUNEL ESCOBAR'S STORY sounds like an American dream-come-true, that's because it is. In fact it's hard to believe that just three and a half years ago, the 25-year-old shortstop was living in Cuba, without real hope of a bright future in any career, much less playing professional baseball. Contrast that bleak outlook with the current one.

Escobar enters the season as the Braves' starting shortstop, following in the highly qualified footsteps of Edgar Renteria, his mentor and friend. It's a position he earned by putting together an outstanding rookie season following his June 2 promotion from the Richmond Braves (Triple A), when he was called upon to cover third base for the injured Chipper Jones.

Escobar quickly proved a valuable member of the Braves, remaining with the major league club for the rest of the season and expertly filling in at shortstop when Renteria went on the disabled list on Aug. 3.

As the regular shortstop, Escobar gave the Braves organization and their fans a glimpse into the future. At times he played like a seasoned veteran. And by season's end, his performance (.326 batting average with 25 doubles and a .385 on-base percentage in 94 games), gave general manager Frank Wren the confidence necessary to trade Renteria to Detroit for two prospects, secure in the knowledge that Escobar could handle the job.

But baseball is just one of Escobar's passions, and it's a means to an end

when it comes to his other great love, his family. Though his relationship with his wife, Minerva, ended last fall, Escobar is determined to keep his family close.

"Without baseball I wouldn't be here (in the U.S.)," said Escobar, who worked on his English this off-season but still uses an interpreter for most interviews. Brayan Pena, a fellow Cuban expatriate, as well as a good friend, neighbor and teammate, handled the duties.

"Without baseball, my family wouldn't be here," Escobar continued. "To have both is a dream come true. We have so much now, and we had so little just a few years ago."

Once considered a player of great promise by those involved in Cuban baseball, Escobar played for a 'National Series' team, similar to the U.S. major leagues. As a member of the team, he was expected to perform at a high level at all times for national pride, not for a paycheck.

Bullpen coach Eddie Perez, a native of Venezuela who played and coached against teams from Cuba, said playing baseball in Cuba is much more than a game.

"Sometimes you have guys who aren't motivated because they know they aren't going to get paid anything," said Perez. "It's a tough way to play."

There are stories of teams who lost games at night only to find that breakfast was not served the next day.

Escobar's talent was well-known, as were his desires to find a better life for himself and his family in the United States.



ATLANTA BRAVES



CARLOS RESTREPO

Baseball inspired Escobar to make a daring escape from Cuba, and his success later enabled his mother, Mariluz, sister, Yunay, and father, Mariano, to follow him to the U.S.

The Escobars share this 4-bedroom, 4-bath home in Miami, where Yunel's memorabilia includes his first big league home run ball (inset).



PHOTOS BY CARLOS RESTREPO

He was taken off the National Series team in an attempt to keep him from defecting when the team played in other countries. But the drive to help his family, through baseball, outweighed any punishment the government could dish out.

In October 2004, Escobar and five other baseball players made the harrowing 90-mile boat crossing from Cuba to the United States, chronicled in the September '07 issue of *ChopTalk*. At the time, Escobar wondered if he would ever see his parents - father Mariano and mother Mariluz - and sister, Yunay, again. But due to the intervention of high-profile Cuban Americans in Miami, Mariano and Yunay arrived in the U.S. in January 2007. And Mariluz made her own amazing journey to the states last summer, arriving in Atlanta in July.

At last, the reunited Escobar family was living under one roof, in the house Escobar purchased in 2006, the year he played at Mississippi (Double A).

"I bought the house because it was near to Brayan Pena," said Escobar, who hit .336 last year after the All-Star break, 17th-best in the NL (second among NL rookies). "We grew up together, so I wanted to live close by if I could."

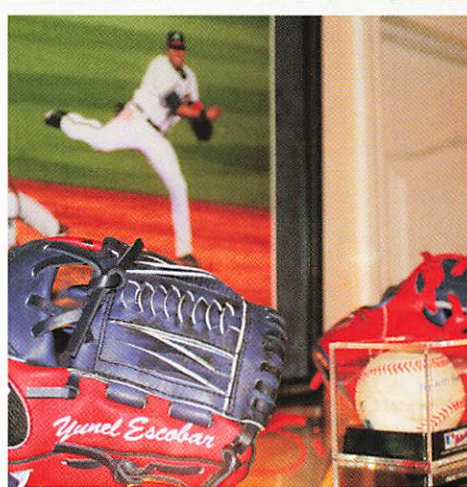
The house is not located in a "fancy," gated neighborhood, like many major leaguers live in. The houses are close together and have similar facades. The Escobars live in a classic Florida-style house - light tan stucco with bright white trim, traditional red tile roof, obligatory palm trees out front, sparkling blue pool in the back. Hanging over the front door is a plaque reading: "We Interrupt This Family For Baseball Season!"

But it's a "dream house" beyond anything Escobar ever imagined he could provide for his family.

"There are no great houses in Cuba!" said Escobar, who was a second-round draft pick (75th overall player) in 2005. "If there are any, we never got to see them."

When pressed, Escobar estimated the main living space of the family's home in Cuba at approximately 12 feet by 15 feet.

"Like a studio apartment," said Escobar.



"Smaller than that," interjected Pena.

Their Cuban home had two main rooms, a bedroom for the parents and another room where they cooked, ate, lived, and where Escobar and his sister slept. They were fortunate to have a small, indoor bathroom.

By contrast, the house in Miami is spacious, with four bedrooms and four full bathrooms. "Now we all have our own rooms and we have an extra bedroom, in case Brayan Pena wants to sleep there!" said Escobar, who struck out just 44 times in 319 at-bats last year. "My mom sometimes feels like it is so

big that it scares her. The house feels too big when she's alone."

There are no personal items from Cuba as part of the décor. In fact, walking from the front door to the back and throughout the house, visitors wouldn't know a Cuban family lived there unless they checked the selections of CDs and DVDs where Latin artists are found in abundance.

But the sunny exterior is brought inside with more bright colors, crisp wood accents and cool tile floors. A glass-topped table holds a bouquet of silk flowers, orange and deep burgundy, flanked by tall, bronze-colored candlesticks holding colorful candles.

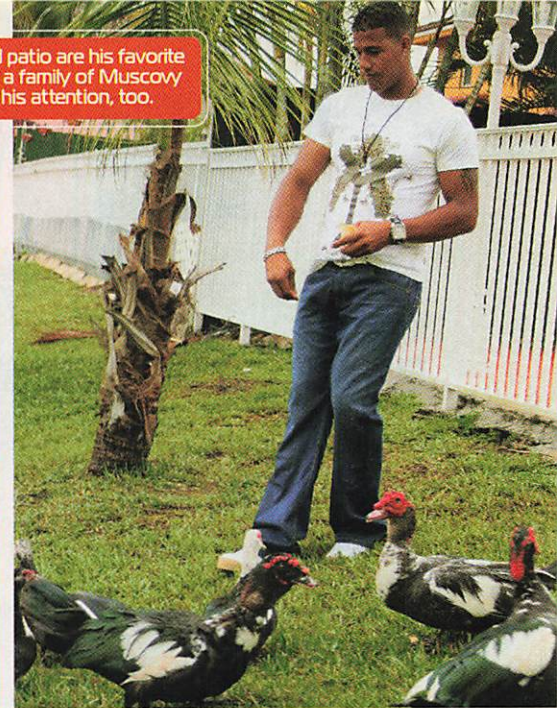
Between the dining and living rooms, an open scissor staircase with a landing has wood railings with scroll metal accents. The living room walls are light adobe red with a tan accent wall. The furnishings are simple but comfortable - chocolate brown leather with ultra suede cushions in earth tones.

A flat screen, high-definition television is built into the living room wall and is framed with rich, dark wood. Displayed on a console table under the television are three framed photos - Escobar posing with a bat, sitting in the dugout with Hank Aaron during spring training 2007, and the 2007 Braves team photo.

One of the four bedrooms is located downstairs and is furnished with a sofa, desk and computer and many of Escobar's trophies, awards and other memorabilia. His first major league home run ball, hit last June 4, two days after his callup, off the Florida Marlins' Wes Obermuller, sits in a case between two of



Escobar says the pool and patio are his favorite features of the home, and a family of Muscovy ducks receives a lot of his attention, too.



PHOTOS BY CARLOS RESTREPO

his fielder's gloves.

Caps from the Mississippi, Richmond and Atlanta Braves hang on the wall, along with framed certificates from his 2006 Double-A season proclaiming Escobar the team leader in hits, runs scored, RBIs, and on-base percentage, and a home plate shaped plaque for his accomplishment as 2006 Mississippi Braves Player of the Year.

"I hope to have a room filled with trophies and jerseys," he said. "In the future, any awards I get will be in that room."

The dining room is light and colorful with a glass-topped dining table set for four. Escobar's framed jerseys from the 2006 All-Star Futures Game (he played for the World team) and 2007 Braves season are proudly on display.

The updated kitchen has a small sitting area, a café style table for two, granite counters, and shiny new appliances.

Escobar admitted he's enjoyed the excellent Cuban home cooking since his mother's arrival last summer. The family continues the Cuban custom of eating their main meal of the day at midday. The timing was perfect as Escobar worked out for about four hours, four times a week this off-season, usually lifting weights for two hours before taking infield and hitting practice for another two hours.

After a session in early February, Escobar's workout partner, Edgar Renteria, who also lives in the Miami area, and several other friends, visited the family at their home for the midday meal. They started with a dish of appetizers including fried plantains before Mariluz served heaping bowls of roast pork and black beans and rice. The group sat in the dining area outside by the pool.

"It's my favorite thing about the house," said Escobar of the pool and patio.

A small round hot tub spills into the large swimming pool and is surrounded by a brick pool deck. Tall white lampposts illuminate the pool area at night. The patio is fenced and has a white railing at the back, facing a community lake.

A family of several ducks has taken up residence in a stand of palm trees in the corner of the patio.

"The ducks are part of the family," said Escobar. "They just showed up, probably because of the lake, and laid some eggs. Then they decided to stay. So, I feed them."

Escobar is a respectful son and affectionate brother who includes his parents in gatherings with his friends. Mariano and Mariluz are adjusting to life in America, making friends in the community and reveling in their children.

Yunay, 11, is a tall, lovely, fifth-grader who speaks English remarkably well for someone who arrived in the U.S. just 16 months ago. She attends a local public school and shares the same gentle eyes and shy smile as her brother.

"I spend so much time away during the season that I want to dedicate a lot of time to them," said Escobar of living with his family. "I'm not planning to move any time soon."

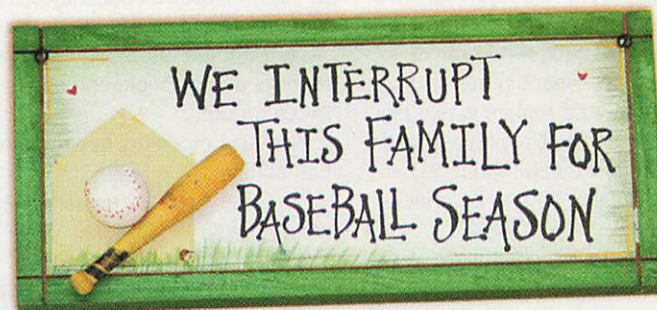
Escobar seems completely at ease in his new life. Most of the time, his life in Cuba seems very far away. But the community where he lives is home to many Cuban émigrés. When word came in February that Fidel Castro was stepping aside to make way for his brother, Raul, to serve as Cuban president, the news was welcomed by Escobar and many of his countrymen. He sounded cautiously optimistic about what that change might mean for Cubans living in the U.S.

"It would be a wonderful day for us, if Fidel was not in power,"

he said. "Not just for me, but for all the Cuban players, every single one of us. Because we all want to be able to visit Cuba, our homeland."

But nothing, not Castro's future nor Escobar's past, distracts him from his twin focus - baseball and family.

"To me, it is like a dream that I am living in the United States, with all my family around me," said Escobar. "Playing for the Atlanta Braves, even with my good friend (Pena), I have to pinch myself sometimes."



THE MENTOR

EVEN AFTER TRADE, RENTERIA CONTINUES AS ESCOBAR'S "BASEBALL FATHER"

BY PATTY RASMUSSEN

IT WAS A QUICK EXCHANGE, but one that spoke volumes. Braves general manager Frank Wren stood in the dugout during an early spring training workout when shortstop Yunel Escobar walked past.

"Hey Yunel," said Wren. "You've been working out. Muy fuerte (Very strong)."

Escobar nodded yes.

"With Renteria?" asked Wren. "Your amigo?"

"Si," answered Escobar, patting his right hand over his heart, indicating the closeness he feels for Edgar Renteria, his predecessor at shortstop who was traded from Atlanta to Detroit in October to open a spot in the lineup for his protégé.

Escobar, 25, is quick to praise the 32-year-old Renteria, whom he calls his "baseball father." The two men worked out together during the past two off-seasons, and the rewards are evident in Escobar's added bulk and strength, especially in his shoulders and arms, a result of their vigorous weight-lifting program.

But Renteria's influence on Escobar goes much deeper than added muscle and increased infield agility. Escobar's sometimes-volatile personality, which got him into trouble in the past, was tempered by Renteria's professional, gentlemanly demeanor, helping transition a raw rookie to an accomplished major leaguer in less than a year's time.

"Playing last year (94 games in Atlanta as a rookie) was a big step for him," said Renteria, after a long spring training workout at the Detroit Tigers' complex in Lakeland. "I told him that he has to work hard. I said, 'It's your job now. But you have to be professional in everything.'"

The implications in Renteria's advice to Escobar were very clear: Be a pro on the field and off.

"Especially in the way he treats his manager, coaches and teammates," said Renteria, a five-time All-Star and winner of two Gold Gloves and three Silver Sluggers who hit .332 last year, tied for third in the NL.

Escobar had a high-profile conflict with Jeff Blauser, his Double-A Mississippi Braves manager during the 2006 season. The two clashed over issues like Escobar's attitude and loud whistling on the field, a staple of Cuban baseball, a way teams hassle each other on the field. Cuban baseball also includes a good deal of "showboating," which is frowned upon in pro ball.

According to Braves bullpen coach Eddie Perez, who assisted Blauser at Mississippi during 2006, much of the problem was a culture clash.

"Jeff did a great job of managing," said Perez, adding that all Latin players go through similar transitions. "Yunel was adjusting to life here. Sometimes he had a bad attitude. It was tough for him. He was making big changes, but he needed to learn to respect the game even more - the way it's played here."

Perez said he saw substantive changes in the Escobar he first met at Double-A in '06 and the one who played for Atlanta last year.

"That was the Yunel I was looking for," said Perez. "Renteria helped him a lot in every way, but especially in how to play the game the right way and how to stay in the big leagues."

Escobar and Renteria met four days a week to lift weights for a couple of hours at a local Miami gym before meeting at the baseball stadium at Miami Dade College for hitting and infield drills with a group of players, including George Lombard, a Miami resident and former Brave, who was a non-roster invitee to Dodgers training camp

this spring. Escobar's talent has never been in question, and thanks to maturity and mentoring, his skills are even more focused.

"I've lifted a lot of weights and lifted hard," said Escobar. "My mom is a good cook, and she fixes the food I like. I don't eat too much though!"

Renteria modestly downplayed his impact on Escobar's baseball abilities.

"In Cuba, he was one of the best players," said Renteria. "Then when I saw him, I said, 'Wow.' He's learned a lot quick. He's strong, hungry and ready."

Renteria issued a challenge to Escobar.

"He told me he wanted to be the best player in the game," said Renteria. "We'd go to the gym and work out. We took groundballs. But I told him, 'Even though you're young, you're not a 'young player' any more. You have to think like a veteran. You have to behave like a veteran,' because sometimes young players do dumb things!"

Escobar is determined to live up to his mentor's challenge to think like a veteran.

"I have worked very hard to get myself mentally and physically prepared to be the everyday shortstop," he said, through an interpreter. "I feel like I am ready for the next step and the next level."



Though Renteria (L) was deemed expendable due to Escobar's emergence, he continued to guide his protégé's development during the off-season.

MARK DUMERMAN

PAINTING THE CORNERS

BY JAY BUSBEE



GREAT IN '08: FEARLESS SEASON PREDICTIONS!

WE'VE GOT A TRADITION around these parts where I predict how I think the upcoming season will go. So far, I've predicted the Braves will win the World Series the last two years, and for the last two years, the Braves have, uh, missed the playoffs. Hmmmm...maybe this isn't such a great idea after all. But you never know - this could be the year!

APRIL 1 - After having an enjoyable spring training with Tom Glavine and Javy Lopez back in camp, Bobby Cox opens his arms wide and says, "Let's get the band back together! Who's got Steve Avery's phone number? Where's Ronnie Gant? Ryan Klesko?" (Deion Sanders and Walt Weiss show up looking for work and are turned away.)

APRIL 4 - Between starts, Glavine straps on a pair of skates to help the Thrashers' playoff chances. His specialty shot? A slow roller that looks like it'll miss the goal by three feet, then arcs just inside the post at the last second.

APRIL 5 - As a guide to measure his worth, Jeff Francoeur installs in his locker a "stat-tracker," which computes, dollar by dollar, how much each home run, laser throw, and diving catch adds to his future worth. The players' association howls when Francoeur modestly requests that the tracker also run backwards after key strikeouts or errors.

APRIL 18 - In the first game of the L.A. series at Turner Field, Dodger Jeff Kent loops a ball into shallow center field. Andruw Jones dashes from the Dodgers dugout and makes a diving catch, then shrugs sheepishly. "Force of habit," he says.

MAY 12 - In the ongoing negotiations to sign their first baseman to a long-term deal, the Braves offer to rename the ballpark "Teixeira Field." No dice.

MAY 16 - After a brilliant no-hit performance against Oakland in which he pitches like a man half his age, John Smoltz stands at his locker answering media questions about his astonishing longevity. When a reporter introduces herself as "Sarah Connor," one of Smoltz's eyes begins glowing a bright robot-



ic red. "Sarah...Connor?" he says in a slow, robotic voice. The Terminator - er, pitcher - is then hustled off by the Braves PR staff.

JUNE 1 - The Braves make another offer to Mark Teixeira: Guaranteed contracts for all his blood relations and any 10 of his buddies. Still no deal.

JUNE 24 - Noting the success that Francoeur, Brian McCann, and Kelly Johnson are having following an off-season in which all three got married, Cox orders all of his unmarried young players to find a bride - pronto. The team holds a group marriage at home plate before the Milwaukee game, and GM Frank Wren adds a "no-singles" clause to every incoming player's contract.

JULY 15 - By the All-Star Break, the Braves are dead even with the Mets for first place in the division. The Phillies, seven games back, complain loudly that they want to be in the mix, too, and that nobody's playing nice with them. Nobody listens.

Could the ever-smiling Jeff Francoeur be laughing at Red Sox Nation come October?

JULY 30 - As the trading deadline nears, Wren receives a mysterious gift in the mail. He opens it to find John Schuerholz's lucky suspenders. He dons the suspenders, and the phones immediately begin ringing with offers of All-Stars for bats, balls, or barbecue from Skip & Pete's.

AUG. 3 - Success! The team and Teixeira reach an agreement on a long-term deal, just moments before the newly named "Teixeiraville Braves" leave for a west coast swing.

AUG. 28 - Tim Hudson fans a record-setting 23 Marlins. However, Major League Baseball disallows the record because the penny-pinching Marlins ran out a team that included two infants, a dog and a spider monkey.

SEPT. 1 - The Mets, growing desperate, begin pitching Johan Santana every night. When he complains of arm trouble, the team orders him to begin throwing with his other hand.

SEPT. 12 - In a critical late-season series at Shea Stadium, Chipper goes 12-for-12. After one game, Mets pitcher Pedro Martinez has no memory of any of Chipper's at-bats. "I remember him in the on-deck circle... next thing I knew, he was in a home-run trot," Martinez says, fighting back tears.

SEPT. 30 - As the season ends, the Mets wither, the Phillies scream for respect, and the Braves win the division. All is right with the world.

OCT. 15 - It's Boston vs. Teixeiraville in the 2008 World Series! Nobody gives the Braves a chance, but Francoeur, McCann, et al. are unburdened by the saddlebags of cash, endorsements and book deals that the Red Sox cart around. And following an inspirational pre-Game 1 speech by Super Bowl MVP Eli Manning, the Braves run off a four-game sweep, capped when Francoeur catches a deep David "Big Papi" Ortiz moonshot against his cap. Red Sox Nation? Ha!

THE LETTER

BY GARY CARUSO

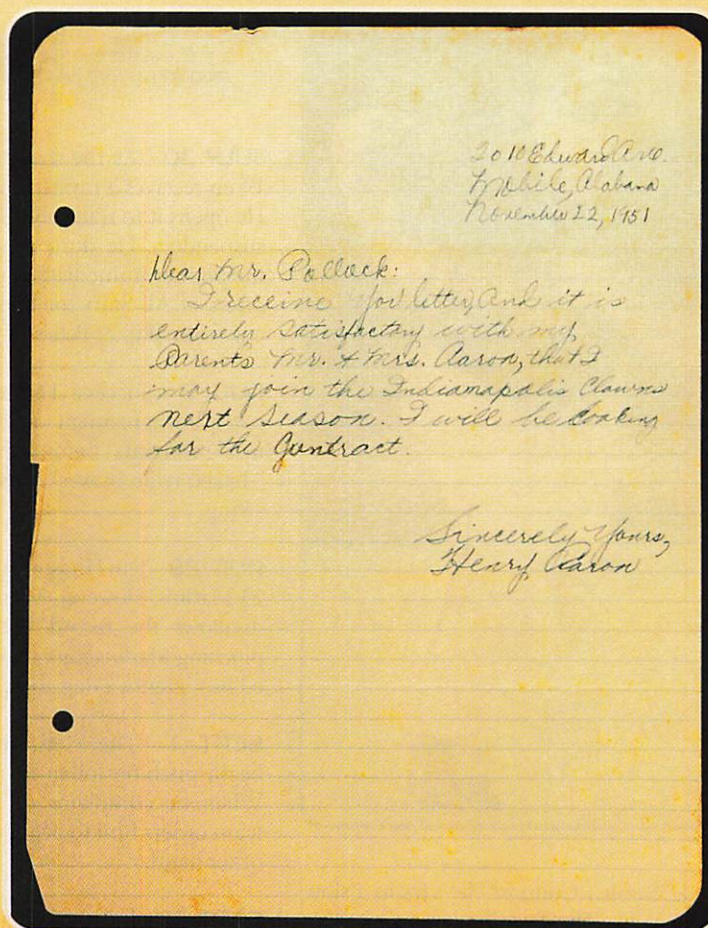
IN THEIR 1967 SMASH "The Letter," The Box Tops sang, "I don't care how much money I got to spend..."

Jeffrey Gitomer didn't write the song - but he could have. Not only is Gitomer a best-selling author of numerous business books, but he also paid \$24,150 to purchase a two-sentence, hand-written letter that Hank Aaron penned on a piece of notebook paper as an unknown 17-year-old boy about to try his hand at playing baseball for pay.

The price Gitomer paid Mar. 9 at Hunt Auctions in Exton, Pa., outside of Philadelphia, is believed to be a record for a modern player's hand-written note. The letter appears to be the earliest example of Aaron's handwriting that pertains to baseball.

"I am a 62-year-old baseball fan and a big memorabilia collector," said Gitomer, who lives in Charlotte, N.C., and has written such New York Times best-sellers as "The Little Red Book of Selling", is a syndicated columnist, and presents seminars on sales and customer service.

"I collect items from two World Series teams - the 1957



Braves and the 1960 Pirates. Both beat the Yankees," said Gitomer. "Hank Aaron was a very young player in 1957 and played a major role in that Series. I have a lot of memorabilia from that team, and lot of Hank Aaron memorabilia. I'm a very big fan of Hank Aaron."

Aaron wrote the letter to Syd Pollock, the late owner of the Indianapolis Clowns, and it was put at auction, along with other items from Pollock's estate, by his family. The letter, dated Nov. 22, 1951, reads, "Dear Mr. Pollock, I receive you[r] letter, and it is entirely satisfactory with my parents Mr. & Mrs. Aaron, that I may join the Indianapolis Clowns next season. I will be looking for the contract. Sincerely yours, Henry Aaron".

Prior to the sale, Hunt Auctions listed the "estimated price range" for the letter at \$3,000-\$4,000. They were just a little off.

"I didn't know if I was going to bid on the letter, but when the bidding started, I went with it," said Gitomer. "I had no idea the bidding would go as high as it did. In the heat of the auction, you decide you want something. I can afford it, so I bought it. I bought a piece of history. It is amazing."

He said there were several people in the room and another on the phone driving the bidding.

"It is one of the coolest pieces we have ever sold," said Dave Hunt of the auction house.

The Indianapolis Clowns saw Aaron while on a barnstorming tour through his hometown of Mobile, Ala., in 1951. He went to a Dodgers tryout but was turned away because they said he was too small. Pollock signed him for the Clowns for \$200 a month, and Aaron left home in 1952 carrying \$2, two sandwiches his mother made him, and a battered suitcase.

Aaron actually batted cross-handed at the time. Dewey Griggs, a Boston Braves scout, convinced him to change his grip and later that year signed him for \$350 a month. The Braves paid Pollock \$10,000 for Aaron's contract, and Pollock gave Aaron a suitcase for his trip to Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to join the Braves' Class C team. Two years later, he became a fixture in the Braves' lineup for their second season in Milwaukee.

"We handle a lot of stuff, and we probably tend to take some it for granted at times," said Hunt. "But this is a truly unique find."

HUNT AUCTIONS



JEFF FASANO

ON BROADWAY

HANK AARON and his wife, Billye, were among many celebrities and dignitaries who attended the opening of the all-black version of Tennessee Williams' classic play "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" Mar. 6 at Broadway's Broadhurst Theatre.



SYNCHRONIZE A FLYOVER

NOTHING BUILDS EXCITEMENT before a big game quite like a flyover. Although fans only see the planes whizzing by for a few seconds, organizing a flyover may take two-to-three months.

"A perfect flyover is: As they're singing 'home of the brave' and they're holding that 'brave,' the planes are directly overhead and they're screaming by," said Scott Cunningham, the Braves' director of game entertainment.

The Braves hold flyovers for special events such as Opening Night, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, and September 11. The Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force have all sent squadrons in recent years. The flyovers have featured aircraft such as F-18s, Black Hawk helicopters, and F-22 Raptors.

After the Braves game entertainment staff finds a squadron, they must obtain approval from government agencies such as the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

Cunningham meets with the pilots and their ground crew to discuss the flyover. The pilots time themselves at a certain speed traveling from the area near Stone Mountain, which lies 20 miles northeast of the ballpark. They also identify other geographical landmarks to help plan their turns.

On game day, Cunningham has the national anthem singer practice the song three times and clocks the length. Most renditions last about 1:40. After all the people involved synchronize their watches, Cunningham and the flight crew designate the time when the planes need to make a turn by Stone Mountain to arrive the instant the anthem concludes. That comes about 30 seconds before the singer begins. If the timing appears off, they may adjust by having the planes take another turn.

"It's challenging," said Cunningham, who said that they usually manage to time the flyover perfectly. "Anything can happen. I don't get any better satisfaction than when a flyover hits dead on, because everything has to be absolutely perfect in order for that to happen."

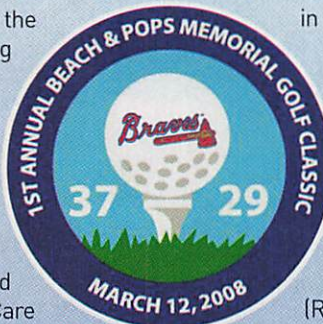
- STEVE FALL



ATLANTA BRAVES

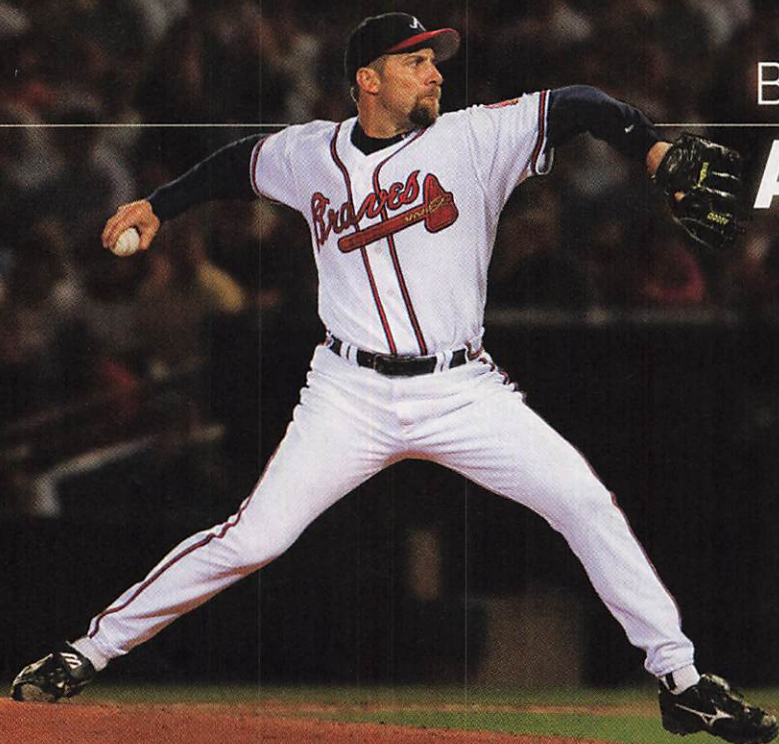
TEE FOR TWO

THE BRAVES lost two popular members of the organization last year, and on Mar. 12 during spring training, the organization remembered Jim Beauchamp and Mel Roberts with the first "Beach & Pops Memorial Golf Classic." Special caps with their numbers (37 Beauchamp and 29 Roberts) were created for participants. The event was held at Disney's Osprey Ridge course. Contributions from members of the Braves' major league staff funded the event and allowed for a donation to Southwest Christian Care



in memory of the two former coaches.

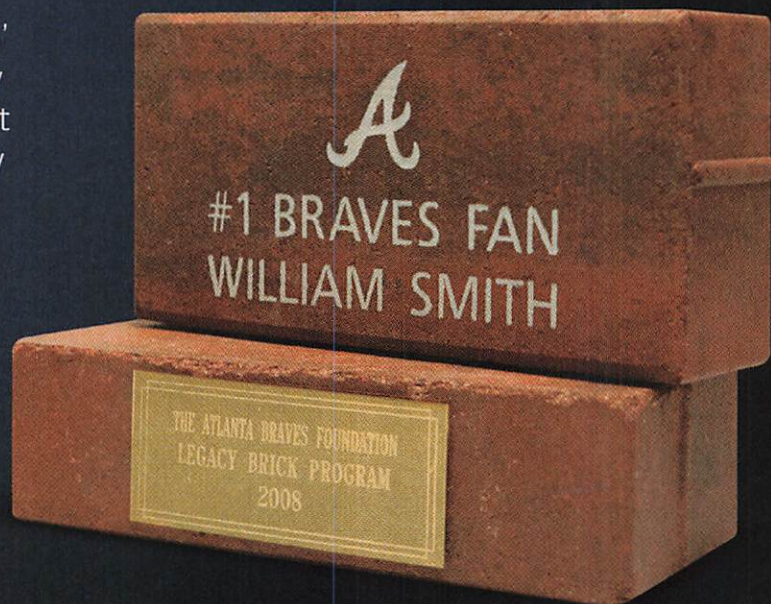
Two teams shot 6-under to tie for first place. One team was composed of Hiro Oya (scout in Japan), Tommy Shields (field coordinator), Matt Price (assistant director, player development) and Luckie Dacosta (strength & conditioning coach). The other consisted of Dave Brundage (Richmond manager), Chris Chambliss (Richmond hitting coach), Greg Hall (Myrtle Beach trainer) and Mike Graus (Richmond trainer).



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GETTING TO KNOW THE GUYS IN THE BOOTH

DURING THE 2008 Atlanta Braves' season, FSN South and SportSouth are serving up the most games, the most coverage and the most HD. Add the most Jon Sciambi and the most Joe Simpson to the list!

JOE SIMPSON

Birthday: Dec. 31, 1951.
Hometown: Purcell, Okla.
Family: Joe and his wife, Kathy, have two children, Meg and Gabe.



What's your favorite time of day at Turner Field?

One of the best times of the day is when I go down to talk to the guys or listen to their banter around the cage before the game. As a former player, I really miss that.

Coffee or tea?

I drink sweet iced tea, and occasionally I will have a soda pop. Yep, we call it pop where I'm from in Oklahoma.

Your favorite movie?

Of all time? Hands down it would be "The Magnificent Seven", only the greatest cowboy film ever made. It was made in 1960.

Something you always wanted to do, or daydream of doing?

Oh yeah, I want to be in a Western. That would be cool. I would love to be a movie extra in a Western or a driver in a cattle drive someday alongside Kevin Costner. I grew up in Oklahoma, and my dad raised Quarter Horses. I rode a lot.

What did you want to be when you grew up?

I wanted to be a baseball player for the New York Yankees. From the time I was 5 years old, all I wanted to do was play in the majors. I was one of the fortunate few to live that dream.

What is it like working with Jon Sciambi?

Jon is very knowledgeable about the game, and he's energetic and prepared. He does his homework, so to speak, and he really studies the game, not just the Braves but the opponents, too. He just knows what is going on in Major League Baseball. I stay on top of the goings-on in the game, but I appreciate that Jon loves the game so much that he's well informed. Probably more than I am.

Does Sciambi do anything that annoys you?

The only thing I can think of with Jon is that he wears really fat ties. I am sure he is making a fashion statement, but the knot in his tie up at the collar is the biggest knot I have ever seen in my life.

Predictions on what the Braves will do this season or any players to watch?

I am very excited about the prospects for 2008. First, having Tom Glavine back on the ballclub is great. In spring training, Javier Lopez made a comeback. Seeing Yunel Escobar at shortstop will be a real treat. He has big shoes to fill, taking the place of Edgar Renteria. This team is going to be a lot of fun for the fans to watch.

With 106 Braves' games on FSN South and SportSouth, fans will be seeing a lot of play-by-play announcer Sciambi and analyst Simpson in their homes and workplaces.

Thought you knew them? Think again.

JON SCIAMBI

Birthday: April 11, 1970.
Hometown: Philadelphia, Pa.



If you weren't announcing, what else would you do?

Non sports-related? I enjoy writing. I think it would be something where I could be expressive in some way.

Coffee or Tea?

I am a caffeinated man, and the Braves serve some of the best press box coffee in baseball. From the start of the game to the end, there are nights I will have five cups of coffee. But I am a weirdo with my coffee. I don't drink dessert. I like real coffee.

Books you have read recently?

"Here is New York" by E.B. White and "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius" by Dave Eggers.

Have you played any pranks on Simpson?

I like to make fun of the way he pronounces words that start with the letter "w." Like in the word "what," he pronounces the "h," too, and I make fun of him on air for it. I just love busting his chops about that.

What are your hours like? What is the job like?

I wake up in the morning and read the newspapers - the AJC, Braves.com and other team papers. I look at national stuff. In the afternoon, I set up my scorecard. I get to Turner Field and get set up in the booth. Then, I talk to the players. Joe and I are typically at the ballpark from 3:30 until close to midnight. A baseball stadium is the best office to have, and I love getting to the stadium early when no one is on the field or in the stands. That just washes over you. It is phenomenal.

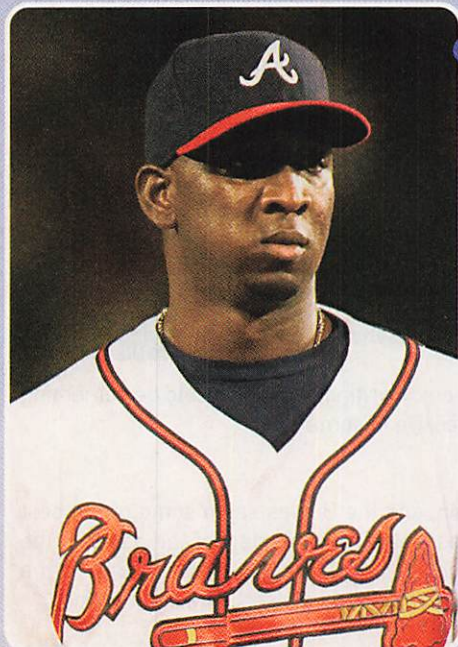
Predictions on what the Braves will do this season?

I would be amazed if I'm not calling games that matter come September. My guess for the Braves? They will be in the top five in the National League for runs scored. The bullpen is strong, and it will come down to starting pitching and what they are able to get from the fourth and fifth starters and how healthy that rotation is. I think the Braves will be one of the best teams in the National League East.

WHERE TO FIND FSN SOUTH & SPORTSOUTH IN ATLANTA

PROVIDER	FSN SOUTH CHANNEL	SPORTSOUTH CHANNEL	HD
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*Check local listings **Note: HD channel numbers are subject to change



INTERVIEW BY PATTY RASMUSSEN
MIKE GONZALEZ SERVED AS TRANSLATOR.

CHOPTALK: What does your new two-year contract mean to you and your family?

RAFAEL SORIANO: For me, I've been working hard this whole time, trying to get something that God has given me now. Everybody is very excited and happy. For me, I don't think this is "it." This is just the beginning of a new life for our family.

CT: What are your feelings about finally getting the opportunity to be a major league closer from the start of the season?

SORIANO: Yes, this is something that I've always wanted from the start of my career. I wanted to be either a starter or a closer, and now this has happened. I feel really good that when I was given the opportunity to close last year, I was able to show [the Braves] what I could do. I'm happy that they saw it and believe I can do the job for them.

CT: The coaches and players say you have the right mental approach [makeup] for being a closer. What does that mean? What's the right mental approach for the job?

Soriano set career highs last year in saves (9), games (71), innings (72) and strikeouts (70) and tied his personal best in wins (3).

SORIANO: For me, it's meant that I always ask questions of the older guys, the veteran guys, when they give advice about how to do things the right way, on the field and out of the stadium. I feel I've learned most from being open to hearing what other players have to share and learning from what they say. The mental approach is making sure I'm ready to do what I need to do and staying focused.

CT: Do you enjoy the pressure of save situations?

SORIANO: It's something that really motivates me, to be in that situation. The pressure situation definitely takes me to another level, especially having all the fans screaming during that time. It gets me excited and makes me feel larger than life.

THE PRESSURE SITUATION DEFINITELY TAKES ME TO ANOTHER LEVEL... IT GETS ME EXCITED AND MAKES ME FEEL LARGER THAN LIFE.

CT: You have an "all business" look on your face - almost a mean look - when you're pitching. Is that intentional or just natural?

SORIANO: No! It's just the way I am. It's part of my mentality and the way I've always been. I'm not being mean, just focused.

CT: How does it feel if you blow a save?

SORIANO: I definitely get frustrated when that happens, but I understand that it sometimes happens in baseball. At the moment, I get frustrated, but then I have to let that go. The next day is a new day for me, and I have to just get ready to go out there and do it again.

CT: Last season you struggled from June 20-Aug. 2 (0-2 with a 6.75 ERA [17.1 IP/13

ER), 0-for-3 in save situations). Why?

SORIANO: I understand that struggles happen all the time in baseball. What I try to do is not sit down and say the problem is just one thing. I go and look at video to check myself out and see how I'm pitching, see what I might be doing wrong, and how I can better myself.

CT: From Aug. 14 to the end of the season, you were almost unhittable (1-0, 4-for-4 in save situations, with an 0.47 ERA [17 games/19.1 IP/1 ER) and .121 opponents' batting average, 3 walks and 24 strikeouts). Did you make a change/adjustment? Did Roger McDowell suggest something?

SORIANO: It was really all about adjustments. I was adjusting to being in a new league for the first part of the season and figuring guys out. I was adjusting to seeing new hitters. Once I got toward the middle part of the season, the hitters started figuring out how I was pitching. Obviously, after talking to Roger and some of the hitters on the Braves,

guys like [former Brave] Andruw Jones, it helped me out. They told me I needed to throw a little more inside with one guy, a little more outside with another guy. They told me different things like that and helped me make the adjustments I needed to make really well.

CT: How do you feel about pitching more than one inning in an outing?

SORIANO: It really depends on the situation. I love to win, and whatever the team needs me to do - whatever that may be - I'm ready to do it.

CT: How many days in a row can you pitch?

SORIANO: Last year, I had a limit of pitching four days in a row. That's the most I've ever thrown. I'm going to be there for the team whenever they need me. If the sit-

uation arises, then as many days as they need me, that's what I'll do.

CT: What are your goals this year?

SORIANO: No, I don't really think about that. I just want to take every opportunity to go out and pitch. I'm going to get those opportunities

CT: What kind of first baseman/outfielder were you?

SORIANO: (Shrugs) Hitting is too much work!

CT: So you don't miss hitting?

SORIANO: No!

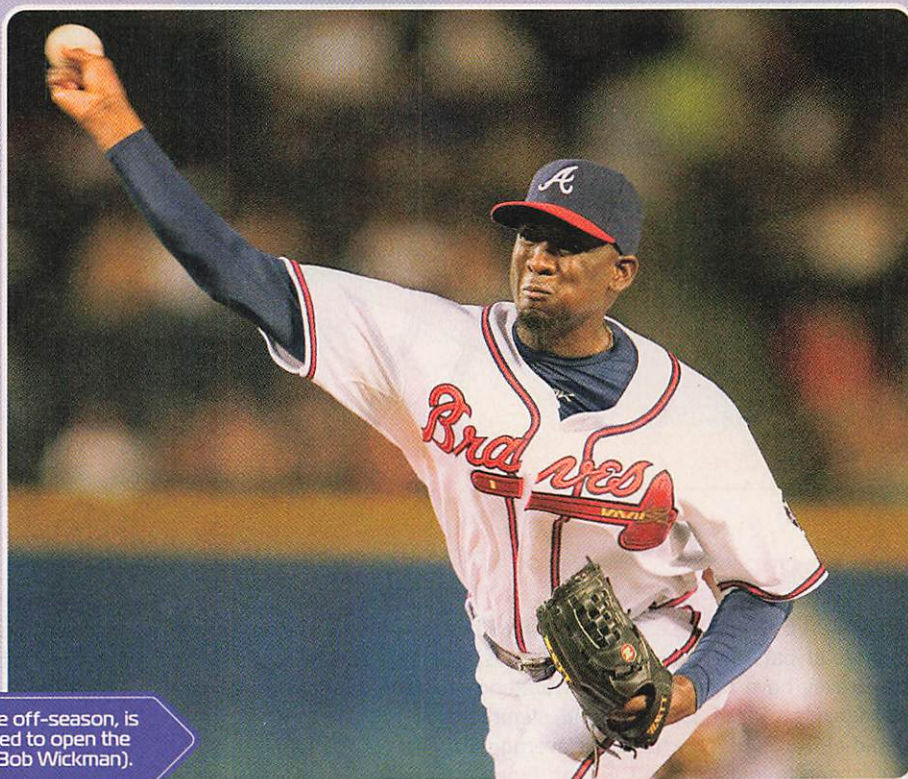
CT: You have such good command and control. Is that something you've always had, or something you had to work on?

SORIANO: I've definitely had to work on

it. When I was younger, I had a lot of bases on balls, but through working on that with pitching coaches and finding myself, my own body, my own mechanics, I've figured it out, and now I can throw strikes.

CT: What pitches do you throw besides the fastball?

SORIANO: I throw a changeup and a slider. But if I can get outs with my fastball, I'd rather throw that every time!



ATLANTA BRAVES

Soriano, who signed a two-year contract during the off-season, is the fourth straight new closer the Braves have used to open the past four seasons (Dan Kolb, Chris Reitsma and Bob Wickman).

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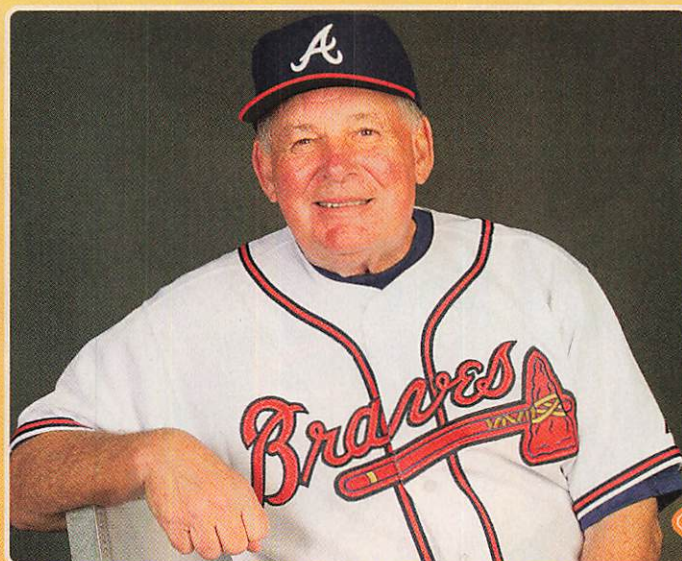
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TRACKING BOBBY



ALLISON SHIPPERS

BOBBY COX enters the season with 2,255 career victories in 26 seasons. He ranks fourth in wins and likely will stay there for quite a while, since the Cardinals' **Tony La Russa**, age 63, is 120 ahead of him with 2,375 wins. The top two spots are held by Hall of Famers **Connie Mack** (3,731) and **John McGraw** (2,763).

Cox is third, behind McGraw and **Joe McCarthy**, another Hall of Famer, in most wins over .500. He's 491 victories over .500 with a 2,255-1,764 record (.519). McGraw is +815, and McCarthy is +792.

Cox, who turns 67 on May 21, is tied with McCarthy for first in 100-win seasons (6), and he's tied for third with **Earl Weaver** and **Al Lopez** for most consecutive winning seasons (15 from 1991-2005). McCarthy is first (20), and **Sparky Anderson** second (17).

Bobby Cox managed the Braves from 1978-81 and the Toronto Blue Jays from 1982-85, before returning to the Braves as general manager in 1986 and returning to the dugout in June 1990.

TWO-OF-FIVE

OF ALL MAJOR LEAGUERS with 600 or more at-bats over the last two seasons, the Braves have two of top five in batting average. **Matt Diaz** (.333) is second, slightly ahead of **Derek Jeter** when their averages are carried to four figures. **Chipper Jones**, who chased last year's NL batting title right down to the wire, is fifth at .331. **Ichiro Suzuki** (.336) leads the crowd, and **Matt Holliday**, who edged Chipper for last year's NL lead, is fourth (also .333 but behind Diaz and Jeter when carried to four figures).

TOP SECRET

What was **John Smoltz** up to in spring training? Developing a new pitch, perhaps? It was tough to tell, because early in the Grapefruit League season, he was hard to find.

Instead of taking his first three regular turns in exhibition games, Smoltz chose to work on the back fields at Disney, pitching in simulated games. He decided to take the covert path to preparing for the season with the consent of **Bobby Cox** and **Roger McDowell**, of course. He did so with the intent to fine-tune his off-speed pitches and mechanics better than he could under game

conditions and also to help save himself for the regular season. Smoltz, who turns 41 on May 15, was scheduled to make his first Grapefruit League appearance Mar. 15.

FLASHBACK

There were some familiar, if slightly older, faces in Braves training camp. Hall of Fame knuckleball pitcher **Phil Niekro** (1964-83, '87) played catch with former teammate **Glenn Hubbard** and then presented the lineup to the umpires Mar. 9 as honorary captain, a title he held for four days. **Dale Murphy** (1976-90) and **Marquis Grissom** (1995-96) also were extended invitations to serve in the same role as part of a program initiated by new GM **Frank Wren** to bring back popular players during spring training.

SHORT HOPS

A Rafael Soriano was slowed in training camp by a stomach virus and some pain above his right elbow. But neither he nor the Braves expressed any concern about his ability to be ready for the season.

A Mike Hampton had to leave his Mar. 7 start early due to a groin strain, and

even though he did not make his next scheduled start, he maintained his work schedule by pitching in a simulated game. He hasn't pitched in a regular season game since Aug. 19, 2005, but was optimistic he'd be in the starting rotation to open the season. He made his spring debut Mar. 2 with two scoreless innings against Houston.

A The pronunciation of righthander **Jair Jurrjens'** name is (JEYE-eer JER-jens). He is the first pitcher from Curacao (where the Braves found Andruw Jones) to make it to the majors.

A After watching former Brave **Damian Moss** (2001-02) throw during pre-spring training workouts at Turner Field, the Braves signed the free agent lefty to a minor league contract. He hasn't pitched in the majors since 2004.

A Javy Lopez homered in his first at-bat of spring training, Feb. 29 against the Dodgers in a 10-3 win.

A Chipper Jones tweaked his right hamstring Mar. 2 but returned to the lineup Mar. 7 showing no effects of the injury.



A New utilityman **Omar Infante** was recovering slowly from a broken hand suffered playing winter ball and likely will miss all of spring training and the early part of the season.

A The Braves came within one out of a spring training rarity Mar. 5, using seven pitchers to string together 8 2/3 hitless innings against Cleveland. The no-hitter was broken up when a non-roster pitcher, **Colter Bean**, gave up a single to a non-roster player, **Danny Sandoval**. The Braves won, 4-1, at Winter Haven. **Jair Jurrjens**, **Jeff Bennett**, **Jairo Cuevas**, **Jeff Ridgway**, **Royce Ring** and **Francisely Bueno** pitched hitless ball for eight innings.

A Righthander **Sergio Valenzuela**, who was taken from the Braves by Cincinnati in December's Rule 5 Draft, was returned to the Braves Mar. 10. Atlanta then traded him to Monclova of the Mexican League for future considerations.

A The Braves-Cardinals game of Mar. 9 drew the ninth-largest crowd (11,259) since Atlanta moved to Disney in 1997.

A The Braves and **Jeff Francoeur** failed to reach agreement on a multi-year contract, so Francoeur's contract was automatically renewed Mar. 3. Twenty other non-arbitration-eligible players signed one-year contracts. They are **Manny Acosta**, **Blaine Boyer**, **Buddy Carlyle**, **Jairo Cuevas**, **Jair Jurrjens**, **Charlie Morton**, **Chris Resop**, **Zack Schreiber**, **Phil Stockman**, **Chuck James**, **Jo-Jo Reyes**, **Jeff Ridgway**, **Royce Ring**, **Clint Sammons**, **Josh Anderson**, **Gregor Blanco**, **Brandon Jones**, **Yunel Escobar**, **Kelly Johnson** and **Martin Prado**.

A **Jeff Francoeur** reported to camp with an extra 15 pounds of muscle he hopes will help improve his home run total of 19 from last year, down 10 from 2006.

A Disney officially christened the Braves' spring training home as Champion Stadium Feb. 29 by virtue of a sponsorship program that includes Champion athletic apparel.

A The Braves opened the exhibition season Feb. 27 with an 8-0 victory against the University of Georgia.

WE LOOK EVEN BETTER THAN I THOUGHT WE WOULD LOOK

THE FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANT thing as the start of the season approaches is that the guys we're depending on are healthy. That's especially significant in the cases of Mike Hampton and Mark Kotsay, who were the two biggest question marks, in terms of health, going into the spring. But they've both been very good so far. We are very encouraged by that.

The other thing is that **Jair Jurrjens** has been outstanding in the battle for the fifth starter job. He's made it difficult for the other guys, but that's what you like to see. We felt the competition would be good and would make for an interesting spring, and it has done that.

Chuck James is behind right now, but his shoulder is healthy. It's a matter of him getting out there and building innings. It will be tough for him to be ready for the start of the season, but he should be ready within a week of the start, if there are no drastic changes.

We should have a very exciting division race with three clubs at the top - us, the Phillies and the Mets. From our standpoint, we feel like we match up well with both of those clubs.

The Phillies have a very deep lineup. The Mets have a very veteran lineup, but they've had some injury problems, and it looks like it'll be a little while into the season before they get their club together.

The way the division shapes up, it would be good to get off to a fast start. With three good clubs, it makes it important to win games early.

From what we've seen, I think we're even a little better club than we thought. Hampton is ahead of what we expected for not pitching the last two years. And Jurrjens is more impressive than we anticipated this early. He's got as good of a chance as anyone to be a big surprise to people this year.

Our starting pitching on a nightly basis should give us a chance to win, and that's all you can ask.

We felt all along that the offense would be one of the better and more productive offenses in the league, if not in the majors. It might not quite match up with a couple in the American League, but it certainly does with everyone in our league.

We have no significant health concerns, just the small bumps and bruises you expect. **Rafael Soriano** is fine, and **Mike Gonzalez** hasn't had any setbacks. We're looking at a June 1 return - give or take a week - for him. We hope he goes out on an injury rehab assignment May 1.

Having **Chipper Jones** and **Mark Teixeira**, two switch-hitters with power, in the middle of the lineup, hitting back-to-back, is a really unusual situation. It's something that is going to give other clubs fits, especially with the guys we have coming behind them, **Brian McCann** and **Jeff Francoeur**. And in front of them, we have **Kelly Johnson** and **Yunel Escobar** and **Mark Kotsay**, depending on where **Bobby** hits them.

Matt Diaz is having a great spring. He doesn't slow down - he just keeps on going - and I think he'll continue to force his way into the lineup more and more.

Francoeur came to camp a lot bigger and stronger, and he's had a good spring. **Kelly** looks like he's ready to take the next step in learning to play second base. He's a lot more comfortable this year than he was last year, especially in going to his right.

Escobar has swung the bat well right from the first day. He's ready to start the season. The time he's spent with **Edgar Renteria** in the off-season had to help him, because he couldn't find a better role model.

“ **HAVING CHIPPER JONES AND MARK TEIXEIRA... IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LINEUP... IS GOING TO GIVE OTHER CLUBS FITS.** ”

FIELD TRIP!



THE BRAVES hosted a group of fourth-grade students on a field trip to the Atlanta History Center Feb. 29 in celebration of Black History Month. The Braves' Tomahawk Tutors accompanied students from D.H. Stanton Elementary on the

trip. The Braves have a long-term partnership with the school to help improve students' reading performance, decrease absenteeism, increase parent participation and encourage physical activity among students.

LEADING OFF...

The Braves' fourth annual Lead-Off Luncheon will take place Tuesday, April 22, at noon at the Intercontinental Hotel in the Buckhead section of Atlanta. Fans have the opportunity to enjoy lunch alongside current Braves players, coaches, executives and broadcasters, as well as Braves alumni. Braves Hall of Fame broadcaster Pete Van Wieren will host a Q & A session with several players, giving all attendees an insightful look at the 2008 team.

Tickets and reserved tables are available by calling (404) 614-1367. All proceeds benefit the Atlanta Braves Foundation.

Individual seats are \$100, and tables of 10 seats are \$750. Tables of 10, including a Braves player, coach or executive and recognition in the printed program, are \$1,000. Tables of 10 including choice of player, coach or executive, recognition in the printed program, verbal recognition, and Turner Field matrix board recognition that night are \$1,500.

Doors open at 10:30 a.m., and pre-luncheon activities will include a silent auction benefiting the Atlanta Braves Foundation, and a Braves Baseball Festival featuring the Braves Tomahawk Team, Heavy Hitters

Drum Line, inflatable hitting and pitching games, and more.

REMEMBERING "BEACH"

The Braves will honor the memory of Jim Beauchamp by wearing a special "Beach" patch on the left sleeve of their jerseys this season. Beauchamp, a long-time coach and instructor in the organization, lost his battle against leukemia in December. He played 10 years in the majors, including 1965 and '67 with the Braves, and was Bobby Cox's bench coach from 1991-98 when the Braves won one World Series, four NL pennants and seven division titles.

SPLIT 'EM UP

Fans now have a new and innovative tool to help share full season tickets with a group of friends. The Braves are the first team in professional sports to offer the "SplitSeason Tickets" online tool to help fans create new season ticket groups.

This web-based service provides a simple way for fans to reach out to friends, family, and colleagues and invite others to

form season ticket groups. Once groups are formed, fans can easily split the games among members with an online drafting service.

Fans can take advantage of two special opportunities to save on full season ticket plans. "Buy 2 Full Season Tickets, Get 2 Free" (Golden Moon Casino Club Pavilion and Terrace Reserved Levels) and \$249 full season ticket packages are available by going to Braves.com/tickets or calling (404) 577-9100. Financing is also available for any season ticket packages over \$199 through the GE Money Sport Finance Program.

TICKET SPECIALS

Single game tickets are on sale at the Braves box office at Turner Field, 1-800-326-4000, Braves.com/tickets, and at all TicketMaster outlets. For details on ticket prices and special offers, see pages 48-49 of this issue or visit braves.com.

Every Tuesday and Wednesday game features a two-for-one ticket offer. Every Wednesday includes a free gate giveaway. Every Thursday is a theme night. Every Friday game is followed by fireworks. And



every Sunday is a "Braves All Star Sunday" when children 14 and under can run the bases after the game, and Braves alumni will sign autographs for fans in Fan Plaza.

COLLEGE DAYS

April 15 is the postmark deadline for this year's scholarship program for graduating Georgia high school seniors that the Braves and Publix Super Markets are partners in for the ninth straight year. Six \$2,000 scholarships will be awarded to students who have demonstrated strong community involvement, as well as solid academic performance.

Scholarship recipients will be honored during an on-field presentation prior to the Braves game on May 18. Each winner will be presented with a check for \$2,000. All applicants will receive a Braves logo backpack.

Applications are available at braves.com/community and at public and private high schools throughout Georgia. Students with a cumulative grade point average of at least 3.0 should submit an application along with: One letter of recommendation; a letter of acceptance from a college or university for the fall 2008 semester; and an essay describing how the applicant has made an impact in the community.

"A" IS FOR BRAVES

The Braves and Chick-fil-A are teaming to reward students for academic excellence with the All-Star Student Achievers Program. The program rewards students in grades K-12 throughout Georgia for their hard work and dedication to academic success. In recognition of their accomplishments, All-Star Student Achievers will receive two complimentary tickets to a 2008 Braves regular season home game and a Chick-fil-A coupon.

Students can become All-Star Student Achievers if they met one of the following criteria for the 2007 Fall Semester: Straight As (including A-); Honor Roll; Perfect Attendance.

All-Star Student Achiever ticket forms will be distributed by schools to qualifying students. Information on the program is also available at braves.com/allstar. Completed ticket forms, signed by the school principal, must be returned to the Braves ticket office at: P.O. Box 4064, Atlanta, Ga. 30302, by June 30, 2008.

IT'S EXCITING TO THINK OF GONZO IN THIS 'PEN

IT APPEARS THAT WE HAVE a very deep, diverse bullpen. If they all stay healthy, I think they have a chance to close out games in outstanding fashion. And we've got starters who can carry us into the later innings. Overall, our pitching, depth-wise, is good.

We have right-handed pitchers who have knockout pitches against left-handed hitters, for example Manny Acosta. He's got that great changeup. Peter Moylan has a changeup now, and he's effective against righties and lefties. It doesn't matter.

Rafael Soriano is good against everybody, period. He made adjustments in the late part of last season against guys who were getting to know him. He throws a lot of strikes. His hits-to-innings-pitched ratio is phenomenal, and his strikeout numbers are good. He got really good at the end and worked through his struggles.

It's good to have those types of guys. Instead of just matching one hitter at a time, you can give them all three or four, whatever. What this does is shorten the games for our starters. We know that from playing other teams with strong bullpens, like the Detroit Tigers when they have everybody healthy. The game is over after six innings.

That's what we're hoping for this season. We're looking for starters to go to the sixth and seventh innings and for a healthy bullpen to finish it.

John Smoltz worked on the back fields at Disney for his first few starts, in simulated games. He did this so he wouldn't get too hyped up and overthrow and could move a little more slowly. I think it was smart.

Mike Hampton looked right in line with all the other pitchers and excelled from what I saw. He needed to knock off the rust when games started, but he's ready to go.

Mike Gonzalez is way ahead of schedule, but we can't go against doctor's orders. We are shooting for seeing him come back in June, possibly the first part of June. Once we get him back, it should be very exciting. He's a class closer that will be pitching in the late innings. He's like money in the bank.

I see strength at every position. Brian McCann as our starting catcher, and Mark Teixeira at first base is as good a guy as you'll find in baseball. Kelly Johnson played great at second last year, and Chipper Jones is an anchor at third.

Yunel Escobar was a young guy last year, and we believe he's going to follow in the footsteps of Edgar Renteria at shortstop. People say Yunel came to camp a little bigger, but I don't think he looked that different. He's always been a big kid. But nothing scared him last year. When we stuck him in there when Edgar was out, he looked like a major leaguer.

Our outfield is set, for the most part. Jeff Francoeur has right field covered, and we'll see what happens in left with Matt Diaz. Mark Kotsay looked great in center in spring training. You'd never have known he had an injury.

We have some great guys to choose from on our bench, and I always say that it's as important to have strong bench players as it is to have a strong bullpen. It gives a manager more options late in the game.

It's kind of a sad thing to see the Dodgers leave their spring training camp, Dodgertown, in Vero Beach. I started my major league career there in 1960. It was a special place, a great training facility in its day, but outdated now.

“ WE’RE LOOKING FOR STARTERS TO GO TO THE SIXTH AND SEVENTH INNINGS AND FOR A HEALTHY BULLPEN TO FINISH IT. ”



The Braves Museum at Turner Field is adding its own retail store this year, as well as a Braves of the World exhibit featuring 155 players from 22 nations, including British-born Harry Wright (below), the man who birthed the franchise in 1871 and served as its first manager through 1881.

BRAVES MUSEUM AND HALL OF FAME

TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALLGAME...

WORLDLY MUSEUM EXHIBIT, NEW MERCHANDISE HIGHLIGHT FUN OPTIONS FOR THE SEASON

BY CAROL CARTER

WITH NAMES LIKE ESCOBAR and Soriano on the Braves roster, fans are accustomed to cheering for players who hail from outside the United States. To honor this tradition, the Braves Museum & Hall of Fame opens its "Braves of the World" exhibit this season.

As of the end of last season, the Braves – dating back to Boston in 1871 – had 155 different players from 22 countries make it to the major league level, says Carolyn Serra, museum director.

The new exhibit will feature flags from the various countries, along with a listing of all the players and photographs.

The first Braves player from another country was Harry Wright, who was born in England. Not only was Wright player-manager for the Boston Braves (then known as the Red Stockings) from 1871 to 1877, and manager from 1878 to 1881, he in fact launched the franchise. And, as noted in *The Braves Encyclopedia*, "His marker in Philadelphia's West Laurel Hill Cemetery reads 'Father of Professional Baseball.' It also could read 'Father of America's oldest continuously operating pro sports franchise – the Atlanta Braves.'"

Wright played several positions, but mostly center field.

Also new at the museum this season is a retail store. Previously, Serra says, "We just had items on tables."

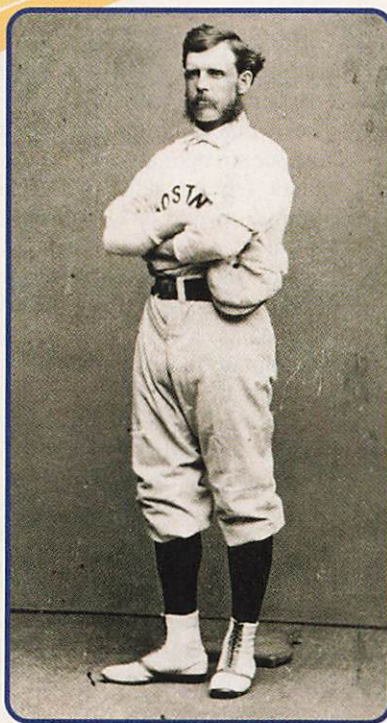
But this year, the museum office has been turned into a store that carries "the same merchandise that you see in the Braves Clubhouse Collection catalog and at the Braves Clubhouse Store at CNN Center." One note to fans, though: The museum store is open during tours, but not during games.

The spring Braves Clubhouse Collection Catalog – in its 26th year – will be available at the beginning of April, and for the first time this season, the catalog will offer men's big and tall selections, says Bob Hope, the Braves' director of merchandising. Men who fit this category will be able to purchase Braves jerseys, polo and t-shirts in sizes 3XL through 6XL.

Included in the women's merchandise – a section that as more than doubled from last year – are a garment-washed chocolate cap, a breast cancer awareness ribbon t-shirt, a spring training jersey, and a velveteen evening clutch bag embellished with a crystal Braves logo.

In the authenticated collections section, offerings include baseballs and mini-helmets signed by Tom Glavine, Jeff Francoeur, Brian McCann and Yunel Escobar.

Again this year, the Braves catalog offers three different gift-with-purchase programs. The first – a Mother's Day promotion – gives a free breast cancer awareness canvas scarf tote (while supplies last) to customers who purchase \$150 in Braves merchandise from the catalog. Details are still in the planning



NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME

stages for the Father's Day and back-to-school promotions.

All in all, the 2008 catalog features 45 different Braves t-shirts and 33 different Braves caps. For more information, visit or contact the Braves Clubhouse Store at CNN Center, (404) 523-5854, or contact the Braves Clubhouse Collection at either 1-800-433-BRAVES (2728) or, by e-mail, at Braves.Clubhouse.Catalog@Braves.com.

Remember that ChopTalk readers now receive a Braves Clubhouse Collection 10 percent discount coupon when subscribing or renewing.

"Bark in the Park," where fans may bring their dog to a game, is back this season (May 4 and Sept. 7), as part of the more than 70 theme and giveaway nights built into the Braves schedule. Every Tuesday and Wednesday game offers a two-for-one ticket deal. Each Wednesday game includes a free giveaway at the gate. Thursdays are theme nights. Show up on July 31, for example, and experience Wild West Night. Friday games end

with a post-game fireworks show. And Sunday games are dubbed "Braves All Star Sunday," when children under 14 are invited to run the bases after the game.

Whatever the opponent, the giveaway or the theme, attending a game somehow always includes eating. New drink items available at Turner Field this season are slushies, vitamin waters, Gold Peak Iced Tea, and Odawalla juices.

New ice cream selections available at the ballpark are Dippin Dots in Braves colors and served in a souvenir helmet, Edy's hand-dipped, soft-serve ice cream (located at Section 105), and Minute Maid smoothies.

For snacking, there is kettle corn, and for a meal, fans may now get a veggie burger.

Fans might want to take an hour-long stadium tour to get a close-up look at - among other things - the new SunTrust Club that features seats closer to home plate than the pitcher, a Braves



ALLISON SHIRREFFS

Canine fans will be welcome at Turner Field twice this year - May 4 and Sept. 7.

luxury suite, the press box, broadcast booth, locker room and dugout. Starting April 1, tours are available at the top of every hour from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m. Monday through Saturday and from 1 p.m. until 3 p.m. on Sundays except on days when there is an afternoon game. No reservations are necessary for individuals or groups of fewer than 20. Tickets can be purchased on the day of the tour at the main ticket window. More information is available at (404) 614-2311.

Fans with children might want to check into tours tailored to elementary and junior/senior high school students. A staff of 15 to 20 guides leads the 90-minute tours that include the:

- Social Studies tour, which focuses on the history of the Braves and the different cities and states that are home to Major League Baseball teams.
- Mathematics tour, which goes into detail about how baseball is a game of numbers. Students are introduced to baseball statistics and learn how they are calculated and used during a game.
- Art tour, which takes students to areas in the stadium where baseball-related artwork - murals, statues, paintings and photography - appears.
- Careers in sports tour, which is targeted to high school students and provides a general overview and perspective of career opportunities in Major League Baseball.

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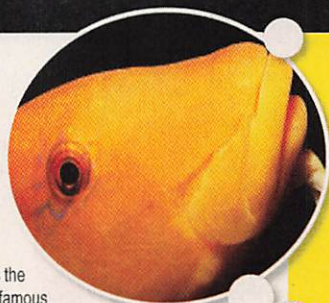
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Pick the ace - whether it's John Smoltz or Tim Hudson, the Braves' starting rotation is in much better shape than it was a year ago, in large part due to the addition of Tom Glavine (below).

PHOTOS: ATLANTA BRAVES

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

THE TALENT AND THE DYNAMICS ARE IN PLACE TO RESTORE ORDER IN THE DIVISION

BY GARY CARUSO

IT'S MARK TEIXEIRA'S first full season as a Brave... Frank Wren's first season as Braves general manager... and for all we know, Bobby Cox's last season as manager (let's hope not). It would be a timely and appropriate season to break that streak of third-place finishes (two) and re-establish proper division hierarchy by finishing in first place.

The Phillies are the defending champs, and the Mets are banking on the recruitment of two-time AL Cy Young winner Johan Santana to get them past the memory of last September's colossal collapse.

The Braves certainly have their work cut out for them if they're to take advantage of Teixeira's presence and, in the process, welcome Wren and perhaps send off Cox with a division title and maybe more. Yet even without Andruw Jones in center field, this team appears well-equipped for the prospect of re-taking the NL East throne. The hitting, fielding and relief pitching are formidable, and the starting pitching - if reasonably healthy - appears deep enough to allow the Braves to make up the ground they gave to the Phillies (5 games) and Mets (4 games) last year.

Atlanta finished 84-78 (.519) a year ago by posting a .275 team batting average, tied for second in the NL, and a 4.11 ERA, third in the league.

With Teixeira batting cleanup all season instead of just the last two months, the lineup

appears capable of being just as productive, and maybe even more powerful, especially if shortstop Yunel Escobar can build on the promise of his rookie season.

And regardless of how the starting rotation shakes down (John Smoltz, Tim Hudson, Tom Glavine and the Two Survivors), there's really no comparison between the potential of this year's staff and last year's.

There's plenty of optimism surrounding this team, and here's why another division title could be in hand six months from now.

STARTING ROTATION

Tom Glavine just turned 42 in March, and when he returned to the Braves after five years with the Mets, he admitted he's not the pitcher he used to be. Remember, though, that this is a 303-game winner. He may not be 25 or even 35 years old, but if he's physically sound, as it seems, he should have the skill and knowledge to contribute 200 innings and double figures in victories.

Glavine figures to be in the No. 3 slot in the rotation, but he fills a critical void that was created a year ago when Mike

Hampton was forced to miss a second straight season with injury. The Braves never found a consistently solid starter to take Hampton's place. This year, they have Glavine, possibly Hampton, and several other promising candidates to fill out the rotation.

Glavine is coming off a 13-8, 4.45 season with the Mets. He enters the season ranked 21st on the all-time victo-

ATLANTA BRAVES

ry list, and could move up considerably this year. With 12 wins, he would pass Gaylord Perry for 17th place, and with 15 wins, he would tie Phil Niekro for 16th. His future Cooperstown induction seems as close to certain as possible at this stage of his career.

John Smoltz remains the ace of the staff, no matter how hard he tries to give that position to Tim Hudson. Like Glavine, he's putting the final touches on an almost-certain Hall of Fame career. Though he'll turn 41 May 15, he's coming off one of the finest seasons of his career.

Last year, Smoltz finished third in the league in strikeouts (197) and fourth in ERA (3.11) en route to winning 14 games, tied for 12th in the NL. He also passed Phil Niekro to become the Braves' all-time strikeout king.

Hudson, 32, is coming off his finest season in three with the Braves and certainly is deserving of the "ace" status Smoltz pins on him from time to time. He was 16-10, 3.33 last year, finishing tied for third in the league in victories and third in innings (224 1/3).

After the Big Three, it's a wide-open race for the fourth and fifth spots in the rotation.

The darkhorse candidate is Hampton, who is continuing to try to battle back from numerous physical setbacks and two full years without pitching. Though he was slowed by a minor groin strain in spring training, he continued on a regular work schedule and appeared determined to earn a spot in the rotation. In his last full season, 2004, the 35-year-old lefty was 13-9 with a 4.28 ERA. He hasn't worked more than 190 innings since 2001 at Colorado, and no one is expecting him to win 22 games like he did for Houston in 1999. But if he can stay in one piece, Hampton could be the type of fourth starter few clubs can match and would create a logjam of talent competing for the No.-5 job.

At press time, it was difficult to know what to expect from lefthander Chuck James (11-10, 4.24) who would be the leading candidate for that slot if he wasn't rehabilitating a partially torn rotator cuff. It was unknown if he would be strong enough to start the season.

Jair Jurrjens, on the other hand, was making a strong case for the job. Acquired from Detroit in the off-season along with minor league outfielder Gorkys Hernandez in exchange for Edgar Renteria, the 22-year-old righthander was 3-1, 4.70 late last year for the Tigers and would have been a strong contender to make their rotation. He was one of the Braves' most-impressive pitchers early in the Grapefruit League,

putting himself in a favorable position to make the rotation.

Other candidates include righthander Jeff Bennett (2-1, 3.46) and lefty Jo-Jo Reyes (2-2, 6.22). Also in the mix is righthander Buddy Carlyle (8-7, 5.21).

THE BULLPEN

It's time to quit picking at the bullpen. Long considered the Braves' weak link, it became the stronger side of the pitching staff last year and unquestionably is one of the team's strengths for 2008.

If there's a concern, it's that closer Rafael Soriano got a late start in spring training because of some tenderness above his elbow. But someone who pitches an inning at a time doesn't need a lot of spring work to build up arm strength. As long as his arm



is structurally sound, as it seemed to be, he should be one of the most-dominant closers in the league.

The 28-year-old Soriano has never had the opportunity to close for a full season. Last year, he was 3-3, 3.00 with 9 saves in 12 opportunities. The hard-throwing Dominican has serious "stuff," proven by the fact that he gave up just 47 hits in 72 innings, holding opponents to a combined .181 batting average. He also walked only 15 while striking out 70.

There are plenty of strong-armed setup men who are well-qualified to get the ball into Soriano's hand. The most accomplished is lefty Mike Gonzalez, potentially a closer, too, though he won't be available until mid-season after he recovers from elbow surgery.

Perhaps the biggest surprise on last year's team was sidearming Australian

Peter Moylan, who began the year at Richmond and ended the season as one of the most-effective relievers in the NL. Moylan was 5-3 with one save and a sparkling 1.80 ERA, limiting hitters to a .208 batting average.

The remaining bullpen candidates include righthanders Manny Acosta (1-1, 2.28), Chris Resop (0-0, 4.15 with the Angels), Tyler Yates (2-3, 5.18) and Blaine Boyer (4-3, 4.30 at Richmond), and lefties Will Ohman (2-4, 4.95 with the Cubs), Royce Ring (1-0, 2.70) and Jeff Ridgway (2-3, 3.06 at Triple-A Durham). Ohman, 30, was a key off-season acquisition, because he is the team's lone experienced lefthander until Gonzalez returns.

CATCHER

Brian McCann is one of the best young catchers in baseball. Only 24 years old, he's coming off back-to-back All-Star seasons, and he was a Silver Slugger winner in 2006, his first full season in the majors, when managers and coaches voted him the best-hitting catcher in the league. McCann's batting average slipped from .333 in '06 to .270 last year when he had a series of minor but painful injuries. However, he still hit 18 home runs and drove in 92 runs in 139 games. His bat remains one of the most productive on the team.

There's plenty of competition to be McCann's backup, with the most familiar name being Javy Lopez. The 37-year-old Lopez did not play last year after being released by Colorado in spring training. A non-roster invitee, Lopez nevertheless will command a lot of attention from his legion



of fans to his teammates, who are anxious to see what he can contribute. A lifetime .287 hitter with 260 home runs, Lopez also was MVP of the Braves' rousing comeback victory over St. Louis in the 1996 NLCS.

Brayan Pena, a 26-year-old who was turned into a utility player at Richmond last year, rookie Clint Sammons, 24, and 32-year-old Corky Miller, who hit .259 in 12 games for Atlanta last year, also will compete for the job.

FIRST BASE

Be prepared for season-long speculation about whether or not the Braves can persuade Teixeira to sign with them rather than opt for free agency. Also be prepared for Teixeira to have a monster season.

Batting cleanup after Kelly Johnson, Yunel Escobar and Chipper Jones set the table for him, the 28-year-old switch-hitter should pile up RBIs about as fast as the statisticians can count them.

In just 54 games after the Braves acquired him from Texas at last summer's July 31 treading deadline, Teixeira drove in 56 runs. Not that anyone expects him to keep up that pace over a full season, but just for fun, it projects to 168 RBIs. While that may sound a little far-fetched, it should be noted that Teixeira drove in 144 runs in 2005, setting an all-time record for a switch-hitter.

So, it might not be a stretch for Teixeira to reach a personal best, which would equal or surpass the all-time Braves record of 145 set by Hugh Duffy all the way back in 1894. The modern (post 1900) franchise record is 135 by Eddie Mathews in 1953, and the Atlanta record is 132 by Gary Sheffield in 2003.

A .286 career hitter who's also averaged 34 homers in his first five big league seasons, Teixeira is a two-time Gold Glove winner for fielding excellence. His backup is powerful second-year man Scott Thorman.

SECOND BASE

The incumbent is 26-year-old Kelly Johnson, who impressed last year after a crash off-season course to learn the position. A former compensation round draft pick (38th overall) as a shortstop, Johnson first was converted into an outfielder in 2005 to get his bat into the lineup. Then he missed 2006 while recovering from elbow surgery. A left-handed hitter, he batted .276 last year with 26 doubles, 10 triples (third in the league) and 16 home runs. He also drew 79 walks, just three behind Chipper Jones for the club lead.

There's plenty of strength behind Johnson, too. Martin Prado, a 24-year-old Venezuelan, has been knocking on the Atlanta door for two years, hitting .277 in limited callup time from the minors.

Off-season acquisition Omar Infante (.271 last year at Detroit) can play second, third, shortstop or the outfield, but he'll miss most of spring training after sustaining a broken hand in winter ball. In 2004 as Detroit's regular second baseman, he hit .264 with 27 doubles, 9 triples, 16 home runs and 55 RBIs.

THIRD BASE

Chipper Jones, one of the most-accomplished switch-hitters in history, is coming off one of his finest seasons, one that nearly ended with his first National League batting title. Jones, who will be 36 in April, batted a career-high .337 last year, second to Colorado outfielder Matt Holliday's .340.

Jones also finished among the NL leaders in numerous other departments, including fourth in both slugging percentage (.604) and on-base percentage (.425). He hit 29 home runs and drove in 102. He now ranks as the all-time Atlanta Braves leader in hits (2,117), home runs (386) and RBIs (1,299).

Additionally, Jones is coming off what



CHIPPER JONES

ALLISON SHIFFRINS

may have been his finest season with the glove. He made just nine errors in 310 chances (.971), the fewest among regular NL third basemen.

SHORTSTOP

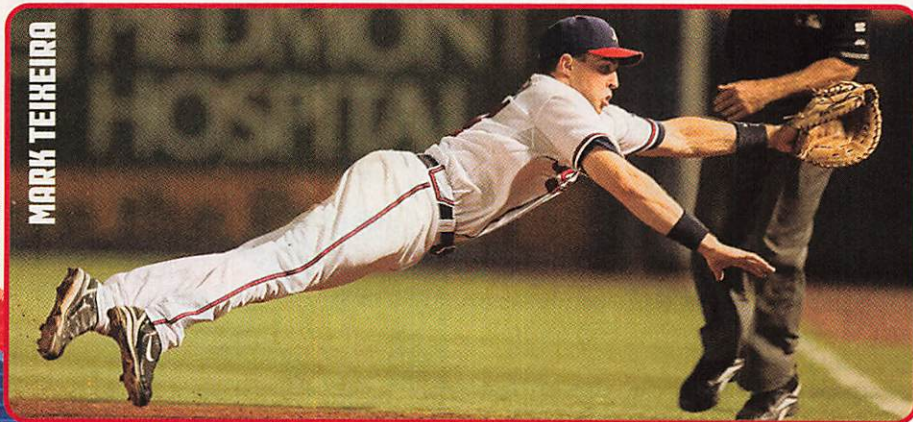
Yunel Escobar is 25 years old and has but 94 games of major league experience. But the Braves think enough of him that they traded Edgar Renteria, a five-time All-Star with two Gold Gloves and three Silver Sluggers, to open up shortstop for him.

As a rookie, Escobar hit .326 with 25 doubles, 5 home runs and 28 RBIs in 319 at-bats. He played steady and often exceptional in the field, and displayed savvy that far exceeded his experience.

Infante, a natural shortstop, will serve as his backup when his hand heals. In the meantime, that role could fall to rookie Brent Lillibridge, 24, who was acquired from Pittsburgh along with Mike Gonzalez for Adam LaRoche prior to last season. He hit a combined .282/13/58 last year at Mississippi and Richmond.

LEFT FIELD

Matt Diaz (.338/12/45) and Willie Harris shared the job last year. Harris was not tendered a contract and became a free agent. The question is whether or not Diaz will play every day, or if he'll be platooned, possibly with rookie Brandon Jones (.295/19/100 at Mississippi and Richmond), who had a brief callup in September, or



MARK TEIXEIRA

ATLANTA BRAVES



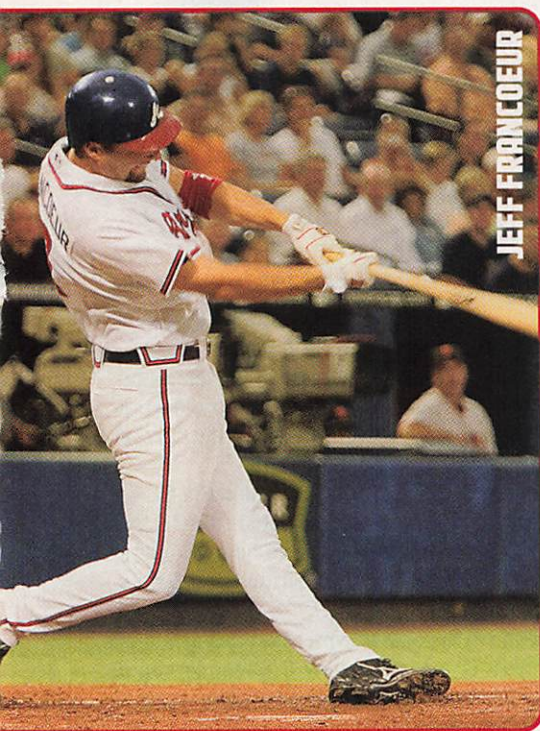
Josh Anderson, another rookie who was acquired from Houston (.358 as a late-season callup) for reliever Oscar Villarreal. In two seasons with the Braves, Diaz, 30, has a combined .333 batting average, second in the majors to Seattle's Ichiro Suzuki during that period (minimum 600 at-bats).

CENTER FIELD

Mark Kotsay has the assignment of replacing Andruw Jones in center field. Acquired by trade from Oakland in January, the 32-year-old Kotsay is a .282 lifetime hitter and an excellent fielder with a strong arm. Last March, he had surgery to repair a herniated disk. Consequently, he spent much of last season on the disabled list, hitting just .214 in 56 games. The Braves hope the former No. 1 draft pick (1996 by Florida) is fully recovered and ready to regain the form that made him a highly regarded player throughout baseball prior to his back problems.

RIGHT FIELD

This position belongs to Jeff Francoeur. There's no need to look for a backup, because Francoeur has played all 162 games the last two years, his first full seasons in the majors. The 24-year-old Atlanta native also drove in over 100 runs (105) for the second straight year and improved his batting average from .260 to .293, though his home runs did drop from 29 to 19.



JEFF FRANCOEUR

ATLANTA BRAVES

I'M TOUGH ON MYSELF NO MATTER HOW I PLAY

I REALLY DON'T HAVE A PREFERENCE about hitting leadoff or not. In a lineup like ours with so many good hitters and players, there's always a chance to make things happen.

That said, I like hitting leadoff - a lot. It suits my approach to hitting, which is to watch the pitches and work the count.

There's a lot of responsibility to hitting leadoff, and it's not all getting on base. When you're watching pitches, working the count, the guys behind you get to see more pitches. They get to see what a pitcher has, and it's beneficial for everyone. You always want guys leading off an inning to do that.

I had so much fun hitting leadoff. It was cool for me to get on base in any way I could. You just want to get on so guys like Chipper and Teixeira can do their stuff!

I was pretty nervous out there (second base) at the beginning of last season. I know I put a lot of extra pressure on myself, because I really believed that I could mess it up enough for them to find someone else to play second.

I do remember the first time I made a doubleplay. It was in a spring training game against the Yankees. Kevin Reese came sliding in and banged his knee against my shin, and I remember thinking: "If that's what it feels like, this could be a long season."

My elbow (Tommy John surgery in 2006) hurt all last year, and I didn't let anyone know. It's great now and 100 percent. But last year it hurt, from spring training until late August, a sharp pain. I didn't tell anyone, because I didn't want to give any reason for me to miss a game.

I'm not saying I'm some kind of hero. It was nine months since I'd had the surgery and I was playing ball. The normal time is 18 months, but I just knew it would be okay, and it is.

I don't know if I have anything to prove, but I'm really hard on myself, no matter how well I do. My motivation is always to cut down on mistakes.

I had the second highest number of errors in the National League (.978 fielding percentage was 10th among NL second basemen), and people might say, "It was his first season at second," but that's not good enough for me. We've got groundball pitchers, and they count on me to make those plays.

Because of the Tommy John surgery, I wasn't able to lift weights and do a lot of strength stuff that off-season. Instead, I worked on agility and came into the (2007) season with better conditioning than ever, but I was fatigued by the end of the year.

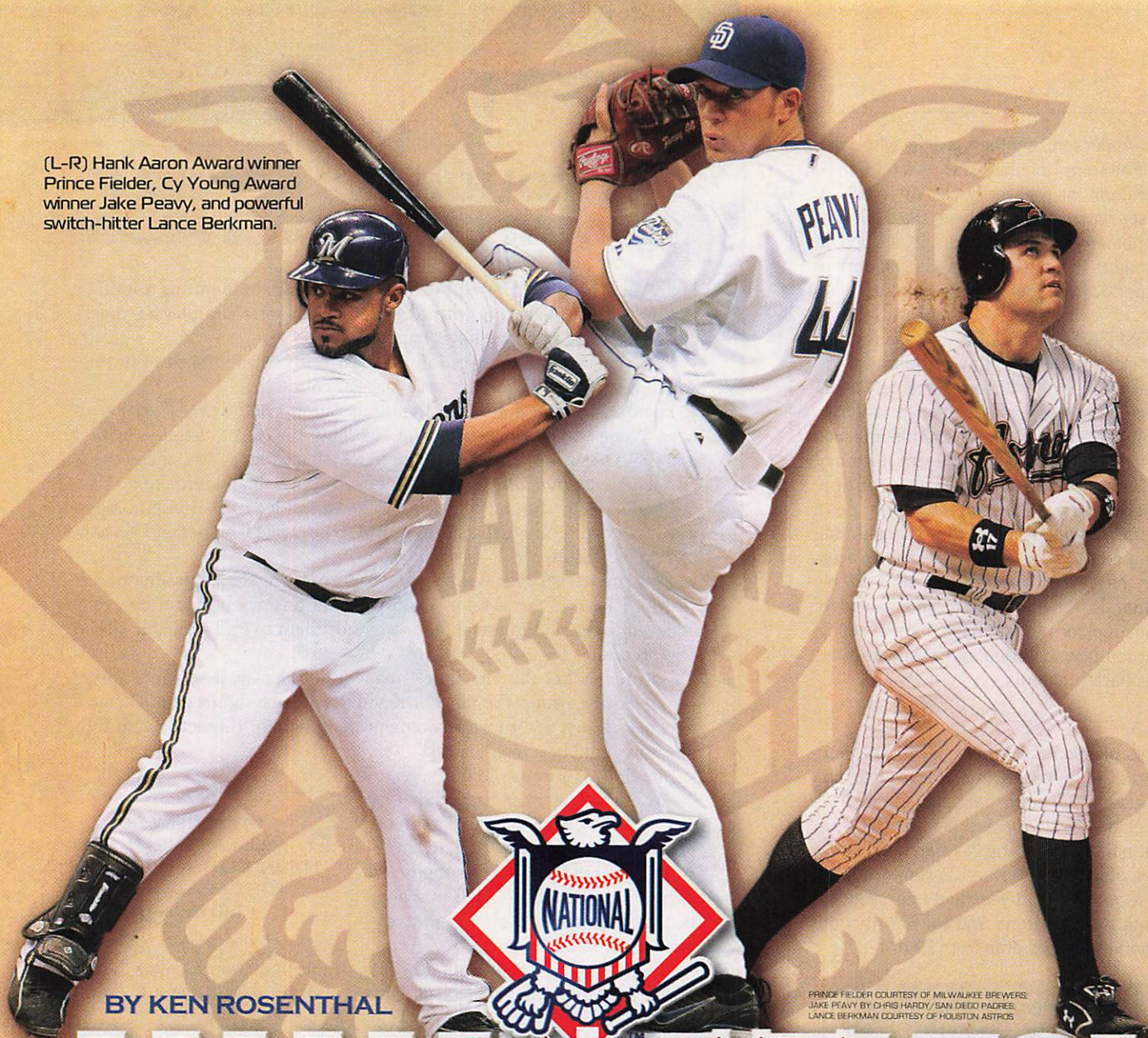
This past off-season, I was able to do the weight work and added strength conditioning, so hopefully I'll be stronger through the entire season. I've found that weight isn't the thing that matters with me - it's the type of weight. I want to be in overall good shape.

I worked out with a trainer during the off-season, and it was great because he really customized the workout for me.

I've learned from others, and Glenn Hubbard is the first guy. In October 2006, he said, "Whenever you're ready, we'll work," and two weeks after the season ended, we started working. First it was one day a week, then we went to two, and by the time Christmas rolled around, we were at it four days a week. If he couldn't be there, Brian Snitker worked with me.

“MY ELBOW HURT ALL LAST YEAR, AND I DIDN'T LET ANYONE KNOW. IT'S GREAT NOW AND 100 PERCENT.”

(L-R) Hank Aaron Award winner Prince Fielder, Cy Young Award winner Jake Peavy, and powerful switch-hitter Lance Berkman.



BY KEN ROSENTHAL



PRINCE FIELDER COURTESY OF MILWAUKEE BREWERS;
JAKE PEAVY BY CHRIS HARDY / SAN DIEGO PADRES;
LANCE BERKMAN COURTESY OF HOUSTON ASTROS

ANALYZE THIS!

ONCE AGAIN, ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE
IN THE HIGHLY UNPREDICTABLE NATIONAL LEAGUE

ON SEPT. 12 LAST SEASON, the Mets held a seven-game lead over the Phillies with 17 games to play. The Phillies then staged one of the great rallies in major league history, winning the National League East to reach the post-season for the first time since 1993.

On Sept. 15 last season, the Rockies had a record of 76-72. They then produced one of the great finishing kicks in major league history, going 14-1 to reach the post-season and winning the first two rounds of the playoffs to qualify for their first World Series.

By now, the message should be obvious: Anything is possible in the National League.

Unlike the AL, which features two super-powers (Yankees and Red Sox) and several other loaded clubs (Tigers, Indians, Angels,

et al.), the NL is testament to baseball's growing parity.

Nine different NL clubs have reached the World Series in the past 11 seasons, compared with six in the AL. A 10th different club – the Phillies, Dodgers or maybe even the eternally cursed Cubs – could be this year's pennant winner.

The payroll differences aren't quite as pronounced in the NL as in the AL. The Central and West divisions, in particular, are fertile ground for the upwardly mobile. Three years from now, even the dregs of the league – the Nationals, Marlins, Pirates and Giants – should be in better positions.

As for this season, no one in his or her right mind has any idea what will happen. But here is a look at how the league could break down, along with capsules of the Braves' inter-league opponents – the four AL West clubs.

NL EAST

1. PHILLIES (1st, 89-73)

MANAGER: Charlie Manuel (4th year)
KEY ADDITIONS: Brad Lidge, closer;
 Geoff Jenkins, RF; Pedro Feliz, 3B.
KEY LOSSES: Aaron Rowand, CF; Kyle
 Lohse, RHP.



BIG STICK: Ryan Howard, 1B (.268, 47 homers, 136 RBIs). Howard led the majors with 199 strikeouts and lost 45 points off his batting average last season, yet still put together a monster year.

ACE: Cole Hamels, LHP (15-5, 3.39 ERA last season). Hamels, entering his third season, talks of winning the Cy Young Award. Let's see him stay healthy for a full year first.

BOXSCORE: On paper, the Phillies are even better than they were at the end of last season, despite the departure of Rowand. The addition of Lidge enables Brett Myers to return to the rotation and Tom Gordon to return to a setup role. Offensively, the signing of Feliz helps offset the loss of Rowand, while Shane Victorino should be every bit as good as Rowand was in center field.

LINESCORE: The big question is whether Lidge will succeed in the closer's role. If he doesn't, the Phillies' staff might crumble.

2. BRAVES (3rd, 84-78)

MANAGER: Bobby Cox (23rd year)
KEY ADDITIONS: Tom Glavine, LHP;
 Mark Kotsay, CF; Will Ohman, LH reliever.
KEY LOSSES: Andruw Jones, CF; Edgar
 Renteria, SS.



BIG STICK: Chipper Jones, 3B (.337 batting average, 29 homers, 102 RBIs). Jones' goal is to play 150 games, a total he hasn't reached since 2003. If he stays healthy, the numbers will follow.

ACE: John Smoltz, RHP (14-8, 3.11 ERA last season). Tim Hudson also fits the description of an ace, but Smoltz has produced 200-inning seasons at ages 38, 39 and 40.

BOXSCORE: The Braves, position by position, are superior to the Mets and comparable to the Phillies. Not even an optimist should expect Smoltz, soon to be 41; Glavine, soon to be 42; and the oft-injured Mike Hampton, 35, to combine for 100 starts. On the other hand, the Braves' newfound rotation depth should enable them to withstand injuries better than their division rivals, and their bullpen also is full of options.

LINESCORE: The Braves' chances might hinge on whether or not young players such as shortstop Yunel Escobar and righthander Jair Jurrjens are capable of playing major roles.

3. METS (2nd, 88-74)

MANAGER: Willie Randolph (4th year)
KEY ADDITIONS: Johan Santana, LHP;
 Brian Schneider, C; Ryan Church, RF.
KEY LOSSES: Tom Glavine, LHP; Paul
 LoDuca, C; Lastings Milledge, OF; Shawn
 Green, OF.



BIG STICK: David Wright, 3B (.325 BA, 30 homers, 107 RBIs last season). Wright might have beaten out Jimmy Rollins for MVP if the Mets had held off the Phillies.

ACE: Santana (15-13, 3.33 ERA for Twins last season). Don't be surprised if Santana reaches 20 wins easily now that he's working in a pitcher-friendly park against National League competition.

BOXSCORE: So much depends on the returns of Pedro Martinez in the rotation and Duaner Sanchez in the bullpen. Santana and Martinez would form a potent 1-2, and Oliver Perez and John Maine should be formidable 3-4 starters. Sanchez would add depth to the bullpen, potentially easing the load on Billy Wagner, who slipped in the second half. The success of the offense hinges, in part, on the ability of Moises Alou (March hernia surgery) and Carlos Delgado (hip pain) to be healthy and productive. Not likely.

LINESCORE: Too much can go wrong, even with Santana. Age and injury questions make this team difficult to embrace.

4. NATIONALS (4th, 73-89)

MANAGER: Manny Acta (2nd season)
KEY ADDITIONS: Lastings Milledge, CF;
 Paul Lo Duca, C; Elijah Dukes, OF.
KEY LOSSES: Brian Schneider, C; Ryan
 Church, OF.



BIG STICK: Wily Mo Pena, OF (13 homers in 289 at-bats last season). Baseball people have always wondered what Pena might do with 500 at-bats. The Nationals plan to find out.

ACE: John Patterson, RHP (1-5, 7.47 ERA in seven starts last season). The Nationals really don't have an ace, at least not one they can trust. Patterson and Shawn Hill, their two best pitchers, both have lengthy injury histories.

BOXSCORE: The Nationals aren't ready to compete as they move into their new ballpark, but they're making progress. Milledge, who turns 23 on April 5, is precisely the type of young player they need to acquire, and Baseball America rates the talent in the Nats' farm system the ninth best in the majors, up from 30th a year ago. The problem is, the Nationals still don't have enough starting pitching to threaten the division powers.

LINESCORE: Acta, a rising star of a manager, again will get the most out of his talent, but the Nats probably will not contend until 2010.

5. MARLINS (5th, 71-91)

MANAGER: Fredi Gonzalez (2nd year)
KEY ADDITIONS: Cameron Maybin,
 CF; Andrew Miller, LHP.
KEY LOSSES: Miguel Cabrera, 3B;
 Dontrelle Willis, LHP.



BIG STICK: Hanley Ramirez, SS (29 homers, 51 stolen bases last season). His .943 on-base plus slugging percentage last season was 68 points higher than the next-best shortstop in the NL - MVP Jimmy Rollins.

ACE: Scott Olsen, LHP (10-15, 5.81 ERA last season). Now that Willis is gone, Olsen needs to step forward. His stuff is top-of-the-rotation caliber, but his maturity has been lacking.

BOXSCORE: The trades of Cabrera and Willis to the Tigers likely will mark the franchise's last major deconstruction - the scheduled opening of a new ballpark in 2011 should give the Marlins a better chance to keep their top young players long-term. The payroll this season, however, will be only about \$20 million, and Ramirez is the only legitimate remaining attraction.

LINESCORE: The Marlins set a franchise record with 108 losses the year after they won the 1997 World Series. Things could get nearly that ugly again.

NL CENTRAL



1. CUBS (1st, 85-77) MANAGER: Lou Piniella (2nd year)

How fitting it would be for the Cubs to celebrate the 100th anniversary of their last World Series title with another championship run. The addition of rightfielder Kosuke Fukudome will help, and leftfielder Alfonso Soriano should be more comfortable in his second season with the club. Piniella will choose from numerous options in his rotation and bullpen – and if Kerry Wood emerges as a late-inning relief threat, look out.



2. BREWERS (2nd, 83-79) MANAGER: Ned Yost (6th year)

Believe it or not, first baseman Prince Fielder, second baseman Rickie Weeks and leftfielder Ryan Braun are still improving as offensive players, and the additions of centerfielder Mike Cameron and catcher Jason Kendall should give the team more leadership. The big question is the revamped bullpen featuring Eric Gagne, Guillermo Mota, Salomon Torres and David Riske. A healthy season from Ben Sheets and a comeback season from Chris Capuano would help.



3. REDS (5th, 72-90) MANAGER: Dusty Baker (1st year)

This team is at a crossroads: Leftfielder Adam Dunn (below, L) and rightfielder Ken Griffey Jr. are entering the final years of their contracts, while a number of younger players – most notably first baseman Joey Votto and centerfielder Jay Bruce – are ready to emerge. The ability of the Reds to contend will hinge on whether or not they produce legitimate rotation options behind Aaron Harang (below, R) and Bronson Arroyo. The addition of closer Francisco Cordero will improve the bullpen, enabling David Weathers to return to a setup role.



CINCINNATI REDS



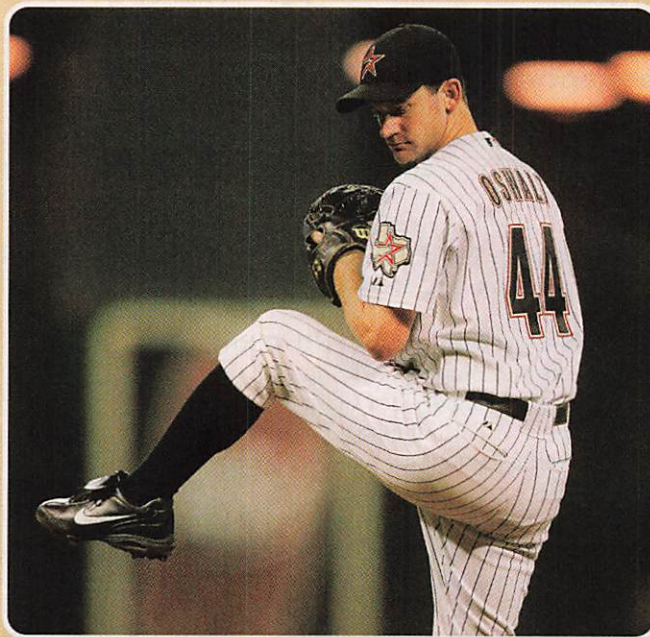
4. CARDINALS (3rd, 78-84) MANAGER: Tony La Russa (13th year)

No Scott Rolen, no Jim Edmonds, no David Eckstein. And, at least to start the season, no Mark Mulder or Chris Carpenter, either. Rick Ankiel will replace Edmonds in center, at least until top prospect Colby Rasmus is ready, while shortstop Cesar Izturis and third baseman Troy Glaus will form the new left side of the infield. The Cardinals' plan is to stay close until Mulder returns in late May and Carpenter gets back around the All-Star break. Easier said than done.



5. ASTROS (4th, 73-89) MANAGER: Cecil Cooper (1st full year)

Shortstop Miguel Tejada, leftfielder Carlos Lee and first baseman Lance Berkman will form a potent middle of the order, and in the Astros' perfect world, centerfielder Michael Bourn and second baseman Kaz Matsui will wreak havoc at the top. Yet, even if all that occurs, the rotation, behind righthander Roy Oswalt (below), is a mess, and a bullpen anchored by volatile closer Jose Valverde does not inspire much trust. It's an odd mix of players.... an inferior mix, too.

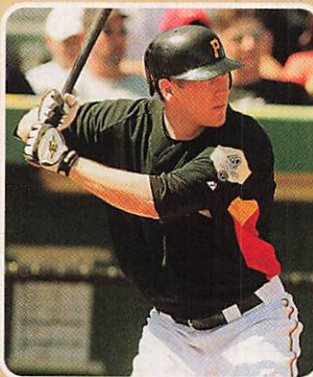


HOUSTON ASTROS



6. PIRATES (6th, 68-94) MANAGER: John Russell (1st year)

The Pirates reacted to their 15th straight losing season by doing practically nothing. The team's new management did not want to trade players such as leftfielder Jason Bay (below, L) and first baseman Adam LaRoche when their values were down. In theory, the Pirates should improve simply by getting more typical performances from their hitters. In reality, righthander Ian Snell (below, R) is the only hard thrower in the rotation, and the team's overall talent is deficient in too many areas.



PITTSBURGH PIRATES

NL WEST



1. DODGERS (82-80, 4th) MANAGER: Joe Torre (1st year)

Can Torre make that much of a difference? Not by himself. But the Dodgers' free-agent signings should provide significant boosts - centerfielder Andruw Jones hit more home runs (26) in a down year than any Dodger hit last season, and righthander Hiroki Kuroda adds further stability to an already strong rotation. If rightfielder Matt Kemp and first baseman James Loney emerge as offensive centerpieces - a realistic possibility based on their 2007 performances - the Dodgers might finally fulfill their promise.



2. ROCKIES (90-73, 2nd) MANAGER: Clint Hurdle (7th year)

The National League champions return with essentially the same roster they finished with last season. Jayson Nix is expected to replace Kaz Matsui at second base, and free-agent reliever Luis Vizcaino will take LaTroy Hawkins' place in the bullpen. However, righthander Aaron Cook is healthy after missing the final seven weeks of the regular season and first two rounds of the playoffs, and righty Ubaldo Jimenez and lefty Franklin Morales figure to be with the club from the start of the season. The offense will again be strong, and the team's young players should only continue to improve.



3. DIAMONDBACKS (90-72, 1st) MANAGER: Bob Melvin (4th year)

The Diamondbacks' record - based on their run differential last season (-20) - should have been 79-83. The addition of righthander Dan Haren further enhances the team's run prevention, but the exchange of closer Jose Valverde for setup man Chad Qualls isn't necessarily an upgrade. Brandon Lyon will replace Valverde, who had 47 saves last season. Offensively, a full year of rightfielder Justin Upton, the anticipated emergence of first baseman Conor Jackson, and continued growth from players such as centerfielder Chris Young and shortstop Stephen Drew could make the D-Backs stronger.



4. PADRES (88-74, 3rd) MANAGER: Bud Black (2nd year)

This is a difficult team to figure. Rightfielder Brian Giles is coming off knee surgery, centerfielder Jim Edmonds is a creaky 37, and the left-field job is a tossup. Pitching will again be the Padres' strength. Righthanders Jake Peavy, Chris Young, Greg Maddux and lefty Randy Wolf are the top four starters, and righty Mark Prior could join the rotation by late May. The bullpen returns intact after leading the NL in ERA by nearly a half-run per game last season. The question remains: Will the Padres score enough runs?



5. GIANTS (71-91, 5th) MANAGER: Bruce Bochy (2nd year)

Quick, name five Giants position players. Now that You-Know-Who is gone, that's no easy trick. Centerfielder Aaron Rowand, the team's big off-season addition, will make little difference. Both second baseman Ray Durham and shortstop Omar Vizquel had injury concerns early in spring training, and the rest of the lineup - Rich Aurilia, Dave Roberts & Co. - is feeble at best. The

Giants' starting pitching will be good enough for the team to compete most nights. But really, that's all there is.

INTER-LEAGUE OPPONENTS AL WEST



1. ANGELS (94-68, 1st) MANAGER: Mike Scioscia (9th year)

The Angels were unusually unsettled this spring. Closer Francisco Rodriguez talked openly about leaving as a free agent after this season, rightfielder Vladimir Guerrero balked at becoming a designated hitter, and righthanders Kelvim Escobar and John Lackey encountered arm trouble. Torii Hunter should prove a quality addition in the early years of his five-year, \$90 million contract, but the Angels lack a strong replacement for shortstop Orlando Cabrera, and third baseman Chone Figgins does not fit the typical offensive profile for the position. If ever there was a year for this team to fall, this is it.



2. MARINERS (88-74, 2nd) MANAGER: John McLaren (1st full year)

The Mariners certainly weren't shy during the off-season, signing free-agent righthander Carlos Silva to a four-year, \$48 million contract and trading five - count 'em, five - prospects for left-hander Erik Bedard. McLaren has assembled an outstanding coaching staff, but the free-agent exchange of Jose Guillen for Brad Wilkerson was not a plus for the Mariners, and the inclusion of left-handed reliever George Sherrill in the trade for Bedard also hurt the major league club. The Mariners are good enough to win 90 games, but need to prove they can do it.



3. RANGERS (75-87, 4th) MANAGER: Ron Washington (2nd year)

The eight-prospect return in two trades involving Mark Teixeira, Ron Mahay and Eric Gagne provided a jolt to the Rangers' farm system, but the short-term view remains bleak. Outfielders Milton Bradley and Josh Hamilton will make the offense more dynamic if they stay healthy and focused, and the recovery of third baseman Hank Blalock from a shoulder injury also should make a difference. But that pitching. . . yuck! Former Braves righthander Kevin Millwood, the Rangers' top starter, would be no better than a No. 4 for a quality team.



4. A's (76-86, 3rd) MANAGER: Bob Geren (2nd year)

General manager Billy Beane spent the off-season trading righthander Dan Haren, centerfielder Mark Kotsay and outfielder Nick Swisher for prospects, and don't be surprised if he continues the trend with righthander Joe Blanton, second baseman Mark Ellis and closer Huston Street. The A's, quite simply, are trying to build a powerhouse for when their new ballpark opens in 2011. Their goal for now is to collect as many quality young players as possible, no matter how painful the immediate results.

- KEN ROSENTHAL IS A SENIOR WRITER FOR FOXSPORTS.COM



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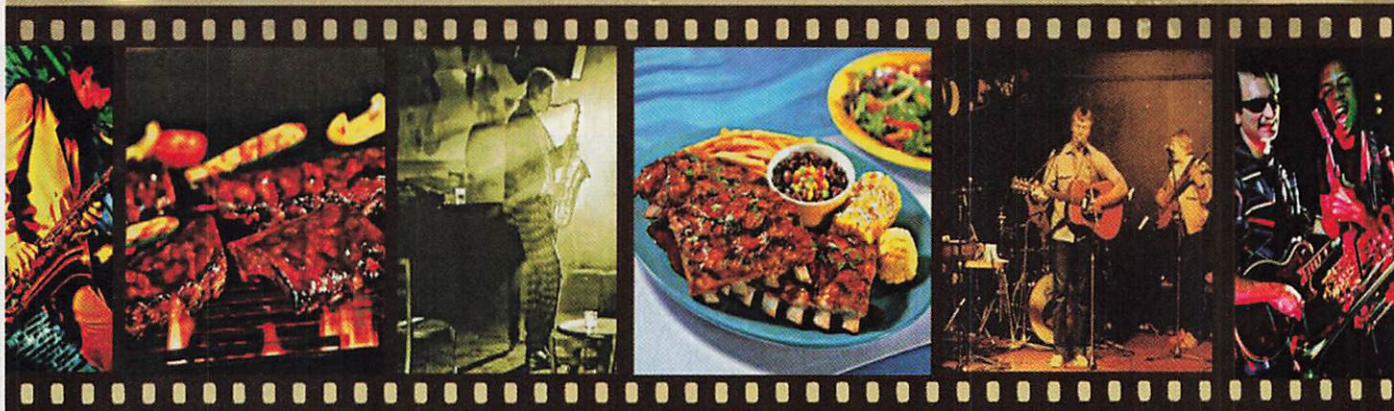
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SORIANO'S CREDENTIALS ARE IMPECCABLE

BY STEVE FALL

RAFAEL SORIANO enters the season with the second-lowest career on-base percentage allowed (.265) among active pitchers with at least 200 innings. Only San Diego's Trevor Hoffman (.265) – who gains the edge when the calculation is taken to another decimal – leads the Braves closer. Soriano also ranks second in baserunners allowed per nine innings (9.52). This time he barely trails the Mets' Billy Wagner (9.48).

Soriano placed second among NL pitchers in baserunners allowed per nine innings (8.00) last season (minimum: 50 innings). Nobody besides Dodgers righthander Takashi Saito (6.85) fared better in this category.

Soriano also posted the third-lowest figure in Braves franchise history. Only Greg Maddux (7.47 in 1995) and John Smoltz (7.83 in 2003) allowed fewer baserunners in a season.



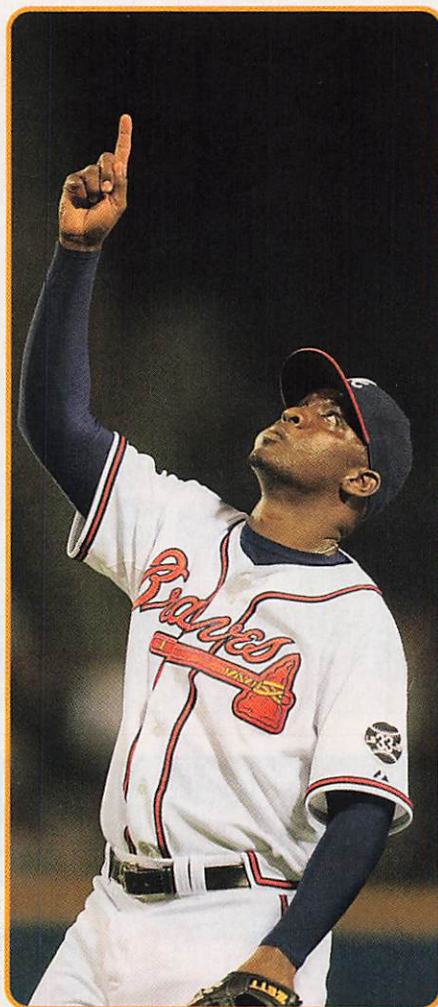
AT THIS TIME OF YEAR, magazines and websites break out their season previews and predictions. Despite all the analysis and numbers, some vital factors usually get overlooked.

These three factors – farm system, run differential, and player age – all favor the Braves more than the Mets and Phillies. So, while the Mets appear to be the favorite, the National League East could again feature a tight race.

The quality of a team's farm system can have a huge impact on its success. In recent years, the Braves have summoned the likes of Jeff Francoeur, Brian McCann and Yunel Escobar in mid-season to help out in Atlanta. A strong minor league system also enhances a team's ability to land established talent at the trade deadline. Just last July, the Braves dealt four prospects and rookie Jarrod Saltalamacchia to the Rangers for Mark Teixeira.

The Braves enter 2008 with the best farm system among the NL East elite. The trade publication *Baseball America* ranks Atlanta's minor league chain as the eighth-best in baseball. The Mets placed 17th *before* they sent four elite prospects to the Twins for Johan Santana. Philadelphia ranks 22nd out of 30 teams.

Those rankings apply to the entire sys-



ATLANTA BRAVES

His apprenticeship behind him, Rafael Soriano should be pointing skyward often this season.

tem (rookie level to Triple A). Focusing only on each club's elite prospects again gives the Braves the edge. ESPN analyst Keith Law lists five Braves minor leaguers among his top 100 prospects. The Mets and Phils manage just one apiece.

The second factor, run differential, also favors the Braves. Although they finished last season five games behind the Phils and four back of the Mets, the Braves had the best run differential among the three teams. This is important because run differential predicts future performance better than won-lost record.

Bobby Cox's club outscored opponents by 77 runs in '07. That edged the Phillies (+71)

and topped the Mets (+54) by a significant margin. This means that the Braves entered the off-season in a slightly better position than the other two clubs – a fact that gets lost when examining only 2007 won-lost records.

While it's a huge factor in determining team performance, player age rarely gets mentioned in pre-season prognostications. Young position players tend to improve, and older ones usually decline. Although there are many exceptions, this helps make team predictions.

Age considerations also work to the Braves' advantage. They have four starting position players entering their age-27 season (based on a player's age on July 1) or *younger*: Francoeur, McCann, Escobar and Kelly Johnson. The Mets have only two starters in this age group with David Wright and Jose Reyes. The Phillies' lone regular to fall in this category is centerfielder Shane Victorino.

Francoeur, McCann, Escobar and Johnson go into the "should improve category" based upon their youth. Teixeira, Matt Diaz and Mark Kotsay all fall somewhere in between their age-28 and age-32 seasons. They get placed in a "stay the same" category. Their performance should not fluctuate much from last season, although Kotsay would dramatically improve his numbers by staying healthy. Chipper Jones is the team's lone starting position player in the "should decline" category for players in their age-33 season or older.

Neither the Mets nor Phils can approach the Braves' breakdown of 4-3-1 in these three age groupings. New York has two starting position players that should get better, four that should stay the same, and two that figure to get worse. Philadelphia has an even less favorable breakdown: one better, five the same, and two worse.

Pitchers' career performance follows a different aging pattern than position players. However, even when we add six pitchers per squad – the projected five-man rotation and closer – the Braves come out with the best age breakdown. They have five players that should improve, five that should stay the same, and four that project to decline. That narrowly tops the Mets (4-5-5) and Phils (4-6-4).

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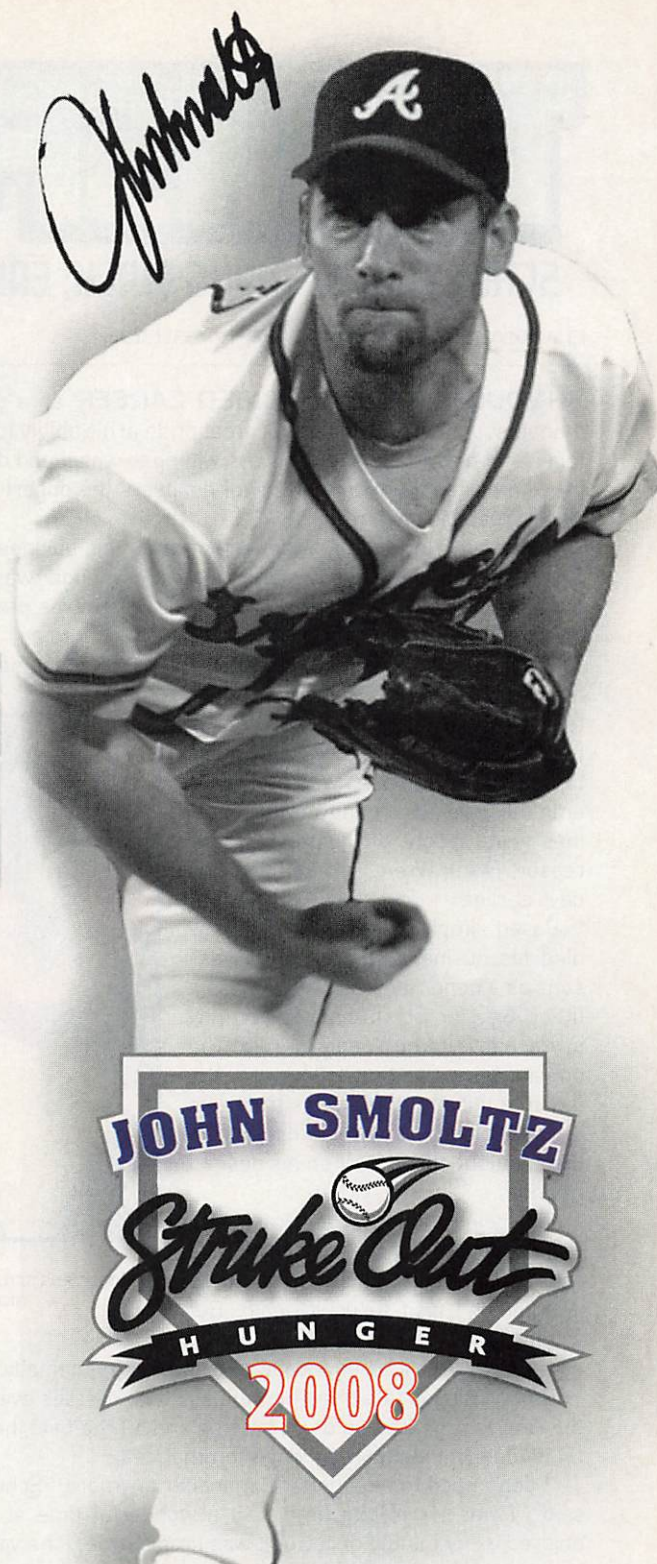
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TRANSFORMATION

SCHUERHOLZ MAKING QUICK, EASY ADJUSTMENT TO NEW ROLE AS PRESIDENT

BY MARK BOWMAN OF MLB.COM

THROUGHOUT HIS STORIED CAREER as a general manager, John Schuerholz took great pride in his ability to maintain a stiff poker face. While always willing to wheel and deal, he never provided the media or any of his peers the opportunity to clearly read his next move.

Because he took great pride in conducting his business away from the public's eye, his career as a general manager was full of surprises. Nearly six months into his role as Braves president, he's continuing to surprise.

Schuerholz turned plenty of heads on Oct. 11, when he ended his days as the game's longest-tenured general manager to assume the position of president. Many of his top aides who had been with him earlier in the week for organizational meetings were caught off-guard. His successor, Frank Wren, was told just two days earlier.

Based simply on the way he'd handled his business during his 26 seasons as a general manager, this was a fitting way for Schuerholz to abruptly say goodbye to his longtime role. The ongoing surprise that followed is the fact that this proud man was truly able to immediately remove himself from the spotlight and give Wren his desired freedom.

"I'm being as honest as I can be, it hasn't been [difficult]," Schuerholz said. "I did that job for 26 years. I loved it. I couldn't wait to do it again. But when I made the decision to do this, I gave it up. I gave it up physically, and I gave it up mentally."

Though his job title gives him the ability to oversee everything the Braves organization does, both on and off the field, he doesn't meddle in the affairs he once commanded.

"I don't need to be a general manager anymore," Schuerholz said. "I was for a long time, had a wonderful time at it, and enjoyed every minute of it. But it was time for me, for a variety of reasons, to do something else."

As last season came to a close and it became apparent the Braves were going to miss the post-season for a second straight season, Schuerholz had more time to evaluate his future. With the guidance of Braves chairman and CEO Terry McGuirk, he decided it was time to learn the challenges a club president faces.

At 67 years old, Schuerholz had nothing left to prove as a general manager. During his stints with the Royals and Braves, he became the first GM to win a World Series in both the American and National Leagues. But his greatest accomplishment - one that may never be matched - was constructing an unprecedent-

ed streak of 14 consecutive division titles.

Now, instead of enduring the daily grind of a general manager, Schuerholz finds himself lending his leadership roles to many different aspects of the organization. When necessary, he has regular contact with Mike Plant, the Braves' executive vice president of business operations, and Derek Schiller, the club's executive vice president of sales and marketing.

He's always willing to provide Wren advice, but for the most part, he didn't play a direct role in any of the off-season's major transactions.

"I love the fact that we still go to lunch together and that I can still bounce stuff off him," Wren said. "I love the fact that his office is next door. Nobody has more experience in this job than he has. So that's a great resource."

Working the past eight seasons as Schuerholz's assistant GM, Wren nurtured some of the skills he used over the past few months, bringing Tom Glavine back to the Braves and landing centerfielder Mark Kotsay in a trade with the A's.

"I think he's done a tremendous job, not only in the final acquisitions that have been made, but also in the processes that he's taken," Schuerholz said.

During the off-season, Schuerholz attended some club-related events, like the January announcement that the Triple-A affiliate would move to suburban Atlanta's Gwinnett County

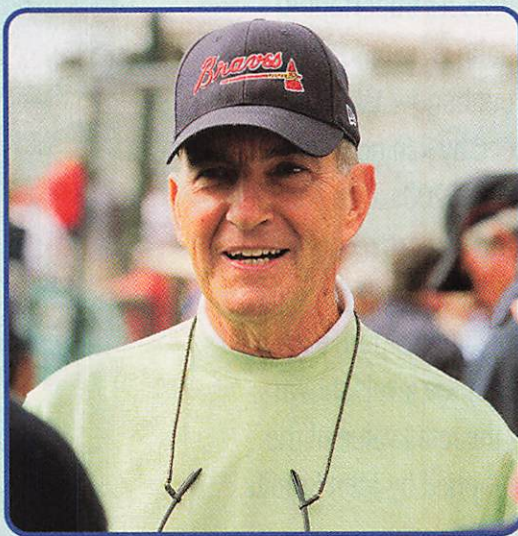
from Richmond. At the same time, he took advantage of the opportunity to exhale and enjoy relaxing with his family.

When it was time for the Braves to report to spring training, Schuerholz was on a golf trip, far removed from the February Florida scene he'd known since he joined the baseball world more than 40 years ago.

In 1966, when he ended his days as a teacher to join the Orioles' front office staff, he was entering an unknown world. Yet, 15 years later, he began one of the greatest careers a general manager could ever imagine.

Now, Schuerholz once again finds himself in an unfamiliar spot. Retirement is certainly an option in the future. But for now, he's chosen to at least keep himself involved in baseball.

"I still had some twinges and tingles when it was time to come to spring training that one day," Schuerholz said. "I got over that. So I'm here now, getting my presidential legs under me, so to speak, trying to figure out how presidents should behave during spring training."



Under less scrutiny and pressure, Schuerholz seems more relaxed in his new role.

ALLISON SHARP/STAFF

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In a non-descript warehouse in Florida, top prospect Jordan Schafer keeps the ProBatter and other devices that are putting him on the fast track to Atlanta.

SCHAFER'S SECRETS

UP-AND-COMING CENTERFIELDER
USES UNIQUE WORKOUT ROUTINE
TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS



DAVID SCHAFER, father of highly touted minor league centerfielder Jordan Schafer, remembers the day he got an inkling of his son's baseball ability.

"My brother was pitching Wiffle balls to him when he was 5 years old," recalled David. "We lived in a two-story house in the Chicago area. My brother came in and said, 'Jordan's hitting the Wiffle ball over the house.'"

Sixteen years later, Schafer, 21, is still impressing. And he's taken steps to help his natural abilities get even stronger. In a bold and expensive move, Schafer chose to invest \$90,000 of his \$320,000 signing bonus in a ProBatter Sports high-tech pitching machine that he keeps in a friend's warehouse near his home in Haines City, Florida. His logic was simple.

"I pitched in high school, so I was behind in hitting," he said. "I figured it would be something that would help me."

His father encouraged the investment.

"He was pretty raw as a hitter and had ground to make up," said David, who researched pitching machines for his son.

"He's just now developing those hitting muscles," said the senior Schafer of his son, who led all of minor league baseball with 176 hits last season.

The machine, used by several major league teams, combines a pitching device behind an 8-by-10-foot screen where a DVD-quality image of an actual big league pitcher is projected. Using a touch pad, the hitter selects the pitcher he wants to face, the type of pitch, its speed (up to 100 mph), sequence, and location. Finally, the hitter stands in and sees the pitcher either wind up, or throw from the stretch. A ball is released and fired through a hole in the screen.

Schafer, who spends between 8 to 10 hours a day working out in the off-season, said he usually hits three times a day. He began hitting against pitches replicating those of two-time American League Cy Young Award winner Johan Santana about two years ago.

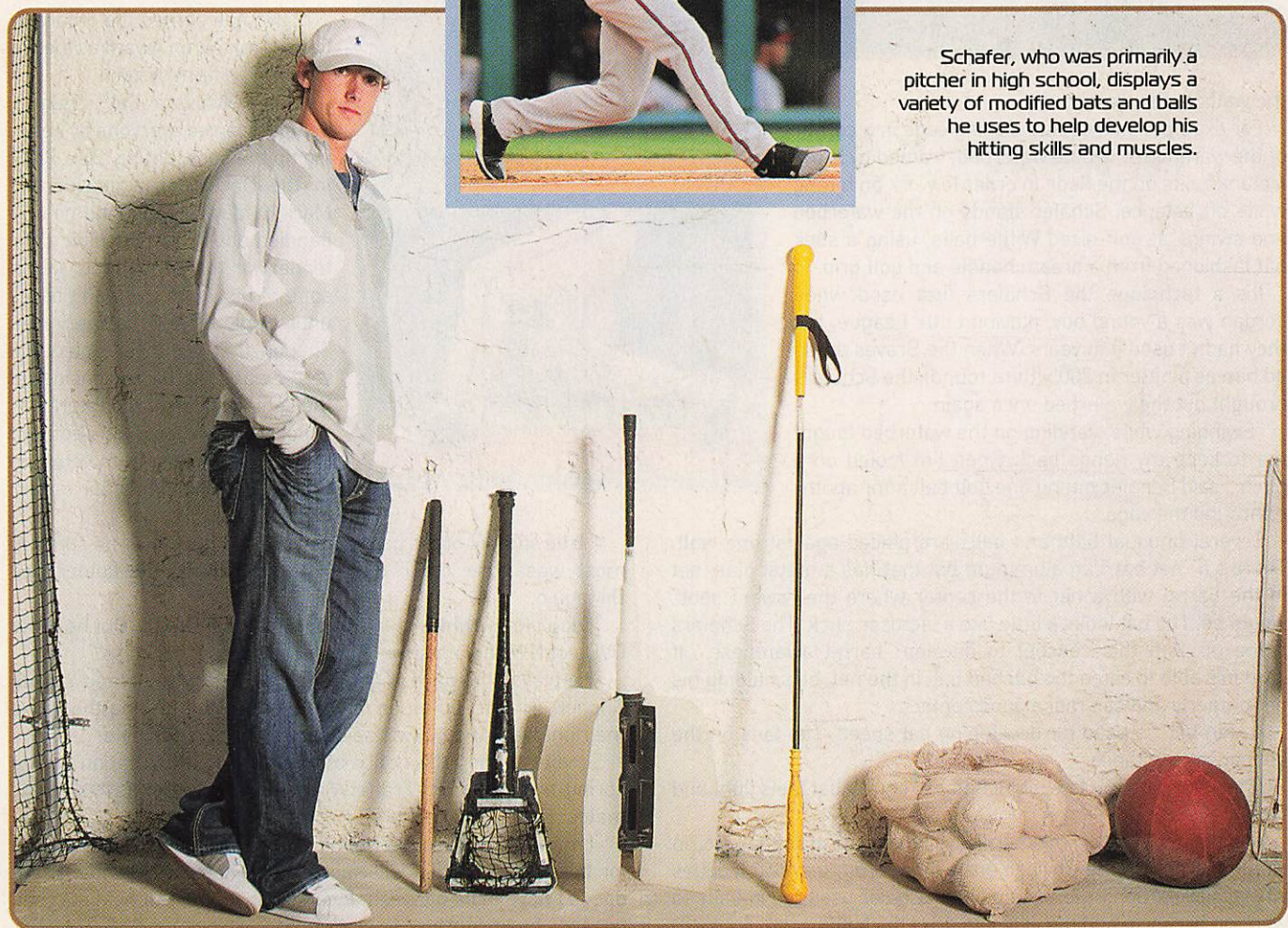
"I figured he was one of the best lefties out there," said Jordan, who bats and throws left-handed. "I didn't know he'd end up with the Mets!"

The pitching machine is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of Schafer's dedication to developing as a player. He and his father have come up with a number of unique ways to work on specific facets of Jordan's game, turning weaknesses into strengths.

A close friend involved in coaching at the college level offers suggestions and drills. Some of the tools they've come up with line



Schafer, who was primarily a pitcher in high school, displays a variety of modified bats and balls he uses to help develop his hitting skills and muscles.





Schafer, who led minor league baseball with 176 hits last year, stands on a waterbed and swings at golf-ball-sized Wiffle balls with a stick bat to work on balance.

ALLISON SHREFFTS

the walls of the warehouse.

For example, in a square batting cage in a corner of the warehouse, a blue waterbed, framed by 2-by-4 planks, sits on the floor. In order to work on hitting while off balance, Schafer stands on the waterbed and swings at golf-sized Wiffle balls, using a stick bat fashioned from a broom handle and golf grip.

It's a technique the Schafers first used when Jordan was a young boy, playing Little League, but they hadn't used it in years. When the Braves drafted him as a hitter in 2005 (third round), the Schafers brought out the waterbed once again.

"Swinging while standing on the waterbed taught me to keep my hands back when I'm fooled on a pitch," said Schafer hitting one golf ball after another around the cage.

Several unusual bats and balls are placed against one wall. There's a "net bat," an aluminum bat that has a metal plate set in the barrel with a net in the center where the "sweet spot" would be. The bat looks a little like a lacrosse stick. The Schafers came up with this concept to develop "barrel awareness." If Jordan's able to catch the pitched ball in the net, he's holding his bat properly and can make good contact.

A "fan bat" is used for developing bat speed. The fans on the bat cause resistance.

After swinging the fan bat, Schafer's regular bat feels light and fast.

And there's a bag of "mush balls," a heavy type of softball, 16" in circumference. In the Chicago area, there are mush ball leagues where players don't even use gloves. Schafer uses mush balls to work on backspin and the ability to drive the ball.

"If you can drive a mush ball," said David, "You can drive a baseball."

In another corner stands a set of hurdles Schafer made out of PVC pipe. During the off-season, he put the hurdles in the back of his Hummer and drove to a lake with a sandy beach. There he'd do over 20 different agility exercises and drills and run the hurdles. The sand created resistance and built up his strength while he did the exercises.

"He was working on explosive speed and developing quick twitch muscle fibers," said David. "He needed explosive speed out of the batter's box and taking off after balls in the outfield."

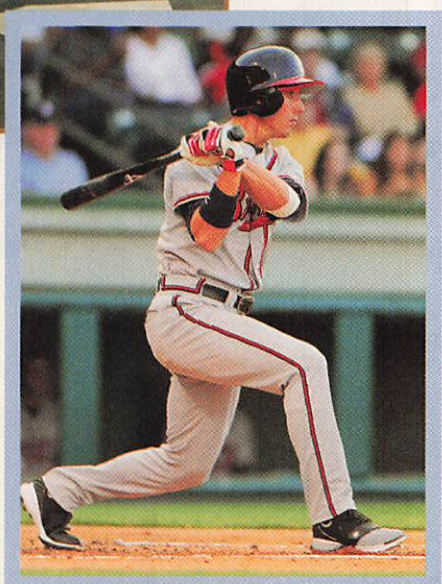
Schafer's off-season routine started in the early morning with a session of hitting at the warehouse. Then it was off to the gym to lift weights. Another session of hitting was followed by his beach workout, and that usually was followed by another hitting session.

If last year's statistics are any gauge, Schafer is reaping the benefits of his hard work. After hitting a disappointing .240 at Class-A Rome in 2006, he hit .373 with five home runs and 20 RBIs there in just 30 games last year. He was promoted to advanced Class-A Myrtle

Beach where he hit .294 with 10 home runs and 43 RBIs in 106 games of the pitcher-dominated Carolina League. His combined .312 average earned the organization's Hank Aaron Award as the top hitter in the farm system.

In the Arizona Fall League, Schafer wowed everyone by keeping up the pace, hitting .324. Prior to the December acquisition of Mark Kotsay, Schafer's name was bandied about as a possible contender for the center field job in spite of his youth (he won't be 22 until Sept. 4) and inexperience. Though that talk has cooled, it's very clear that he is considered the centerfielder of the future.

For the time being, he's content to watch and learn from veterans at spring training as a non-roster invitee.



TOM FREDRICK

A true student of the game, Schafer said the player he admires most was none other than Hall of Fame centerfielder Joe DiMaggio.

"I don't know where that came from," said David. "But he owns DVDs of DiMaggio playing. I think he respects his class."

"He played the game right," said Schafer of the famed Yankee Clipper. "He had so much dignity and pride in playing the game the right way. And he was so classy on and off the field."

Schafer earned the notice of many in the organization during spring training, from Frank Wren and Bobby Cox to his teammates. But the highest praise comes from his dad.

"I'm extremely proud of him," said David. "This has been fun for both of us. Jordan will succeed at whatever he does, and it doesn't have to be baseball. It can be anything. But he'll succeed because he knows how to work hard."



QUALITY LEFTHANDERS ABOUND, AND ROME WILL LEAD THE PARADE

THE BRAVES achieved a rarity last year by fielding not just one all-left-handed starting rotation, but two. Southpaw pitchers, generally considered the most valuable commodities among minor league prospects, ruled the roosts at both Double-A Mississippi and rookie-level Danville during much of the 2007 season.

As a result of the continued progress shown by the pitchers who spent last season at Danville, there is a chance that Class-A Rome could have an all-lefty rotation to open this season. The leading candidates include Jeff Locke, Steve Evarts, Chad Rodgers and Eric Barrett, all considered to be among the top 30 prospects in the Atlanta farm system. Also in the mix are Jose Ortegano, Edgar Osuna and Scott Diamond, with all three making impressive strides over the past eight months.

"There are a large number of pitchers competing for starting jobs at Rome, and most of them are left-handers," said Kurt Kemp, the Braves' director of player development.

Evarts, Locke and Rodgers were drafted in the first three rounds by Atlanta in 2006. Evarts pounds the strike zone, as evidenced by his 34-4 strikeouts-to-walks ratio last year at Danville. Locke allowed only 10 earned runs in his last 10 starts with the D-Braves, winning

his final seven decisions. Rodgers mixes a hard curveball with a fastball that should continue to add velocity as his slender body matures.

Barrett was also drafted by the Braves in 2006 and signed last May after the organization monitored his progress at Logan Community College in Illinois.

Ortegano and Osuna both had impressive success as young pitchers in winter ball. Labeled a "crafty lefthander" due to his off-speed-oriented repertoire, Ortegano led the Appalachian League with a 1.48 ERA in 13 games last season. Osuna placed third in the league with a 2.47 ERA while splitting time between the D-Braves' rotation and bullpen. Diamond signed last summer as a non-drafted free agent after putting together a strong summer performance in the collegiate Coastal Plain League.

One other lefthander of note is likely headed to Class-A Myrtle Beach to open the season after overwhelming hitters in both the Appalachian and South Atlantic leagues. Signed last May as a draft-and-follow pick from 2006, Cole

Rohrbough was named the Appalachian's top prospect after posting a 1.08 ERA in eight outings. He had similar success following a promotion to Rome, which puts him on the fast track in the organization.



Jeff Locke, the Braves' second-round draft pick in 2006, was 7-1 with a 2.66 ERA last year, earning Pitcher of the Year recognition at rookie-level Danville.

IMPRESSIVE RETURNS

For the past two decades, the Braves have built their major league roster via the draft as well as any team in baseball. That trend should continue, particularly if the early returns from the Class of '07 prove to be an indication.

The Braves quietly admit they are shocked they were able to get the amount of talent they drafted last June. That begins with first pick Jason Heyward, who looks like a steal with the 14th overall selection. The 18-year-old has proven to be physically mature with impressive strength. He runs exceptionally well and possesses an accurate and strong throwing arm that will enable him to remain in right field at higher levels.

"The things he's been showing us in spring training are a little scary," said scouting director Roy Clark. "There isn't anything he can't do on a baseball field. And the beautiful thing is, he only wants to get better. His desire to improve is off the charts."

Not unlike Heyward, corner infielders Freddie Freeman and Jon Gilmore have shown improvement at the plate since joining the organization.

While many scouts believe Freeman and Gilmore are on the verge of developing into the Braves' top prospects at first and third base, respectively, the steal of the draft may be third-rounder Brandon Hicks, a shortstop from Texas A&M.

Undrafted out of San Jacinto (Texas) Junior College in 2006, Hicks parlayed a

single season with the Aggies into a high-round, albeit rare, college draft pick of the Braves. Playing at Danville and Rome last year during his initial taste of pro ball, Hicks showed excellent arm strength at shortstop, as well as consistent hands and good range. His bat also has above-average pop, all of which has some Braves officials believing Hicks could move rapidly through the organization.

"Everything I've seen and heard indicates that Brandon is really making a move at a very early stage in his career," Clark said. "It always takes several years to accurately evaluate a draft, but when you look at guys like Heyward and Hicks and the other guys we were able to draft and sign, it makes you excited about what the future holds."

Legends OF THE MINORS

BY BILL BALLEW

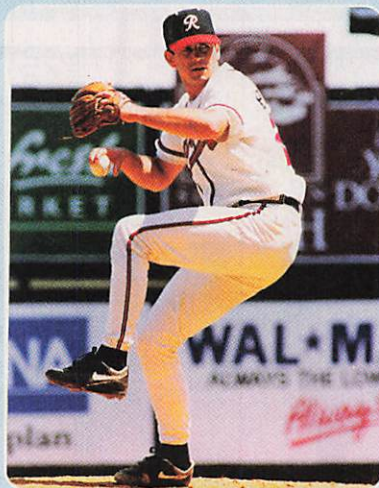
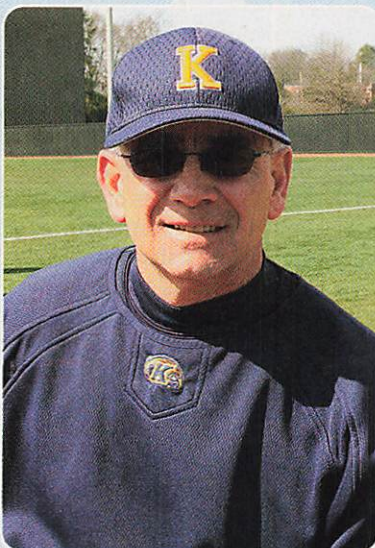
SERVING AS a starting pitcher at Triple-A Richmond in the early 1990s was the equivalent of being the Maytag repairman, with the likes of Tom Glavine, John Smoltz and Greg Maddux working every fifth day in Atlanta.

The situation, however, neither frustrated Mike Birkbeck nor caused him to fret. A four-year major league veteran with the Brewers who underwent shoulder surgery in 1989 after going 10-8 for Milwaukee in 1988, the righthander realized his responsibilities centered on serving as an insurance policy for the Atlanta organization.

"I knew my role going in, and it was very easy to accept," said Birkbeck, who pitched for the R-Braves in 1993 and 1994. "My job was to stay ready in case something happened. Fortunately for the Braves, I guess, nothing really happened. The one time it did, they called up Brad Woodall. He deserved it, and we were all happy for Brad. In the meantime, my job was to do the best I could, wherever I was. I have no regrets whatsoever."

Ever the professional, Birkbeck posted 13 wins in each of his two seasons with Richmond and a combined ERA of 2.92. He was named the team's most outstanding pitcher in 1993 and served as a catalyst for the R-Braves Governor's Cup title a year later.

"I reflect on those two seasons at Richmond all the time. I guess you do that when you get older," said the 47-year-old Birkbeck. "Those were the two most enjoyable years I had in pro baseball, and I think a lot of it had to do with (manager) Grady Little. He made baseball a lot of fun to play."



EDITOR'S NOTE

Since the formation of the National League in 1876, baseball's best minds have been baffled by players who excel - often to extraordinary levels - in the minor leagues but never get over the hump in the majors. The Braves have had their share of these players that ChopTalk profiles monthly in this feature.

Birkbeck received his chance to return to the majors in 1995 with the Mets before spending parts of two seasons in Japan. Upon retiring as a player, he was named pitching coach for the Kent State University Golden Flashes. He was promoted to associate head coach in July 2004, and is currently in his 12th season with the perennial power in the Mid-American Conference.

With his patient guidance, Birkbeck pulls the potential out of pitchers who pass through the Ohio college. The same can be said of Birkbeck's career, which has been recognized with election to five sports halls of fame as well as placement on Richmond's 10th Anniversary All-Diamond team and All-Century team.

SPRING NOTES

Dennis Dixon The Braves rolled the dice last year when they drafted **Dennis Dixon** out of the University of Oregon in the fifth round even though he had not played baseball since high school. A tremendous all-around athlete, Dixon displayed a solid combination of power and speed in 28 games of rookie ball before returning to school to quarterback the Ducks' football team. He unexpectedly emerged as a strong Heisman Trophy candidate prior to tearing an anterior cruciate ligament in late November. "We don't know what the future holds for Dennis right now," Roy Clark said. "Last year he was adamant that he wanted to play baseball, but that was before he had the great season in football. We're hoping he comes back because he has a lot of untapped potential in our sport."

Julio Teheran (Dec. '07 CT) picked up in spring training where he left off in Instructional League with his polish on the mound and maturity off the field. The 17-year-old righthander from Colombia signed with the Braves last July and has emerged as one of the premier young international pitching prospects in the game. His fastball registers in the low 90s, while his breaking ball and changeup are developed well beyond his years. "The quality of his pitches and the way he goes about his business is extremely impressive for a young man his age," said Kurt Kemp.

Gorkys Hernandez, the reigning Midwest League MVP who was acquired from Detroit with **Jair Jurrjens** last October for Edgar Renteria, has made a solid first impression with his raw talent and exceptional athleticism. Hernandez may be the fastest player in the Atlanta organization, and while not a big player, his bat has some significant pop from the right side of the plate.

The Braves received some unexpected good news when Major League Baseball informed them in late February that they will select four times among the first 100 picks in the June draft. Atlanta has the 41st pick as compensation for Kansas City signing Type B free agent Ron Mahay, and the 54th pick as compensation for not signing second-round pick



Josh Fields out of the University of Georgia last year. The Braves, who also pick 67th, 98th and 132nd in the first four rounds, surrendered the 18th overall selection to the Mets by signing Type A free agent Tom Glavine.

Anthony Lerew, once considered the top pitching prospect in the organization, is making steady progress in his rehabilitation after undergoing Tommy John surgery last year. Although Lerew has started to do some light throwing, he is not expected to pitch in a game until the second half of the 2008 minor league season.

The Braves have been encouraged with the continued development of middle infielder **Diory Hernandez**, a player they feared might be lost in last December's Rule 5 draft. The soon-to-be 24-year-old native of the Dominican Republic was given a non-roster invitation to big league camp where he continued the improvement he showed in '07, playing solid defense and making consistent contact with a short swing and excellent hand-eye coordination.

Catcher **Tyler Flowers** was so impressive as a non-roster invitee to spring training that there were internal discussions about the possibility of him bypassing Myrtle Beach and opening the season Mississippi, but a decision was not expected until late March.

The biggest surprise during the early days of minor league camp was the performance of a pair of unheralded young pitchers signed as six-year minor league free agents during the off-season. Righthanders **Luis Valdez** and **Ferdin Tejada**, both natives of the Dominican Republic, have been impressive with their arm strength and ability to make the adjustments to the Atlanta organization. The 23-year-old Valdez was plagued with command issues earlier in his career before posting a 3-4 record with five saves and a 4.79 ERA at Class-A Salem in the Pittsburgh organization last year. Tejada, 25, has battled various ailments but has seen his repertoire begin to click in the past year, including a 2-2 record and a 2.55 ERA in 31 outings at Class-A Charleston in the Yankees' farm system.

IT'S SURREAL TO BE IN BIG LEAGUE CAMP

EVERYONE TOLD ME I would always remember my first spring training with the big league club. Now that I've been through it, I have no doubt they are right.

It's been an incredible experience going up there against top quality pitching. Honestly, it hasn't been as big of an adjustment as I thought it would be. It hasn't been overwhelming, which is kind of what I expected before I went out there the first time. Instead, I've been able to use the same approach I always have, and I've had some success.

Last year I had knee surgery at the end of spring training. I wound up going to Rome and playing a lot of first base. It was a way for me to get back on the field quicker, because the Braves weren't comfortable with me catching on a full-time basis right after having the procedure.

Rome wound up needing a first baseman due to the chain of events in the organization, and I played there while working my way back into catching every third or fourth game.

Before I went to Hawaii last fall, Tommy Shields (minor league field coordinator) made it clear to me that I was a full-time catcher. The reason I played a lot of first base this year during camp was because the team had seven catchers and only two first basemen.

I feel it was important to get some at-bats and some experience at the plate, because that is going to be such a big jump when I do get that opportunity at this level.

Beginning this season, I'll be back behind the plate for most games, and the defensive part of my development will come about by playing every day.

I looked at the spring training invitation as a chance to make a good impression. I hadn't been around the major league coaches that much. I was invited down to Turner Field during the off-season to hit, but 60 feet of netting doesn't really show anyone what I'm capable of doing. By being in camp, I think I've shown some people that I can hit gap to gap with power.

In some ways, the experience in spring training was surreal. Last year I went to a game in Atlanta with my family and sat behind the backstop. A few months later, I'm in the same clubhouse and on the same field as those guys.

I was amazed at how so many guys were willing to help me. Scott Thorman and Mark Teixeira showed me things at first base, and Brian McCann and Javy Lopez worked with me on the little details of catching.

Everyone made me feel like a part of the team instead of being a young kid. I have a bunch of buddies who play in other organizations, and they tell me the atmosphere is not nearly as conducive for young players compared to what I've had with the Braves.

I learned some things last year when I went to Rome. I was a little overaggressive during the first half because I had not played a full season in the organization, and I wanted to prove myself.

My offensive approach was not smart, but I wound up working a lot with (Rome hitting coach) Bobby Moore, and he got me on the right path. He slowed down the game for me, and I wound up hitting around .320 in the second half. That was definitely what I expected.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Tyler Flowers is a 22-year-old catcher/first baseman from suburban Atlanta. He was a non-roster invitee to spring training and hit a two-run homer in his first Grapefruit League at-bat, Feb. 28 against the Dodgers. The 6-4, 245-pounder batted .298 with 12 home runs, 70 RBIs and a .488 slugging percentage at Rome last year.

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WANA	104.3	Anniston	AL	WLJA	93.5	Ellijay	GA	WISE	1310	Asheville	NC
WJOH	100.5	Birmingham	AL	WPGV	1560	Ellijay	GA	WYSE	970	Canton	NC
WSPZ	690	Birmingham	AL	WBHB	1240	Fitzgerald	GA	WEGO	1410	Concord	NC
WKNU	106.3	Brewton	AL	WDUN	550	Gainesville	GA	WAZZ	1490	Fayetteville	NC
WKUL	92.1	Cullman	AL	WGGA	1240	Gainesville	GA	WFSC	1050	Franklin	NC
WGMK	106.3	Dothan	AL	WDDK	103.9	Greensboro	GA	WGNC	1450	Gastonia	NC
WYTK	93.9	Florence	AL	WKEU	1450	Griffin	GA	WBLO	790	High Point	NC
WHEP	1310	Foley	AL	WHIE	1320	Griffin	GA	WLON	1590	Lincolnton	NC
WJBY	930	Gadsden	AL	WCEH	610	Hawkinsville	GA	WCNG	102.7	Murphy	NC
WTWH	93.9	Guntersville	AL	WNGM	1230	Hiawassee	GA	WCVP	600	Murphy	NC
WGSV	1270	Guntersville	AL	WIFO	105.5	Jesup	GA	WCVP	95.9	Robbinsville	NC
WIQR	1410	Prattville	AL	WLOP	1370	Jesup	GA	WCAB	590	Rutherfordton	NC
WWIC	1050	Scottsboro	AL	WMGP	98.1	LaGrange/Newnan	GA	WSTP	1490	Salisbury	NC
WTDR	92.7	Talladega	AL	WVCC	720	LaGrange/Newnan	GA	WOHS	730	Shelby	NC
WACQ	1340	Tallassee	AL	WPEH	92.1	Louisville	GA	WRGC	680	Sylva	NC
WACQ	101.1	Tallassee	AL	WPEH	1420	Louisville	GA	WPUB	102.7	Camden	SC
WJOB	95.5	Thomasville	AL	WIFN	105.5	Macon	GA	WQSC	1340	Charleston	SC
WJOB	630	Thomasville	AL	WKZR	102.3	Milledgeville	GA	WQNT	1450	Charleston	SC
WAAZ	104.7	Crestview	FL	WMVG	1450	Milledgeville	GA	WPCC	1410	Clinton	SC
WJSB	1050	Crestview	FL	WKUN	1490	Monroe	GA	WCOS	1400	Columbia	SC
WRUF	850	Gainesville	FL	WMTM	1300	Moultrie	GA	WFIS	1600	Fountain Inn	SC
WLTC	1430	Panama City	FL	WMTM	93.9	Moultrie	GA	WCCP	104.9	Greenville	SC
WALG	1590	Albany	GA	WCOH	1400	Newnan	GA	WSNW	1150	Seneca	SC
WGPC	1450	Albany	GA	WRGA	1470	Rome	GA	WSPG	1400	Spartanburg	SC
WISK	98.7	Americus	GA	WSRM	95.3	Rome	GA	WBCU	1460	Union	SC
WISK	1390	Americus	GA	WSNT	99.9	Sandersville	GA	WALI	93.7	Walterboro	SC
WGAU	1340	Athens	GA	WSNT	1490	Sandersville	GA	WDEF	1370	Chattanooga	TN
WRFC	960	Athens	GA	WLJG	900	Savannah	GA	WJZM	1400	Clarksville	TN
WUBL	94.9	Atlanta	GA	WMCD	107.3	Statesboro	GA	WCLE	104.1	Cleveland	TN
WGST	640	Atlanta	GA	WUNS	1240	Statesboro	GA	WCLE	1570	Cleveland	TN
WJVA	105.7	Atlanta	GA	WJAT	800	Swainsboro	GA	WHSN	640	Johnson City	TN
WGAC	580	Augusta	GA	WHR5	1590	Swainsboro	GA	WGOC	1320	Kingsport	TN
WGAC	93.1	Augusta	GA	WZBK	106.5	Sylvania	GA	WLIL	730	Lenoir City	TN
WRDW	1630	Augusta	GA	WSYL	1490	Sylvania	GA	WJIM	1490	Lewisburg	TN
WFNS	1350	Blackshear	GA	WTGA	101.1	Thomaston	GA	WMSR	1320	Manchester	TN
WBBK	1260	Blakely	GA	WTGA	1590	Thomaston	GA	WCDZ	95.1	Martin	TN
WSFN	790	Brunswick	GA	WPAH	1240	Thomasville	GA	WCMT	1410	Martin	TN
WJTH	900	Calhoun	GA	WTUF	106.3	Thomasville	GA	KWAM	990	Memphis	TN
WBTR	92.1	Carrollton	GA	WTIF	107.5	Tifton	GA	WGNS	1450	Murfreesboro	TN
WLBB	1330	Carrollton	GA	WTIF	1340	Tifton	GA	WGNS	100.5	Murfreesboro	TN
WRCG	1420	Columbus	GA	WNEG	630	Toccoa	GA	WGNS	101.9	Murfreesboro	TN
WRLO	95.3	Columbus	GA	WKWN	1420	Trenton	GA	WLIK	1270	Newport	TN
WCON	99.3	Cornelia	GA	WAAC	93.3	Valdosta	GA	WPFT	106.7	Pigeon Forge	TN
WCON	1450	Cornelia	GA	WGOV	950	Valdosta	GA	WAYA	93.9	Spring City	TN
WYVU	104.5	Dalton	GA	WVOP	970	Vidalia	GA	WMVA	1450	Martinsville	VA
WBLJ	1230	Dalton	GA	WYUM	101.7	Vidalia	GA	WHEE	1370	Martinsville	VA
WSEM	1500	Donalsonville	GA	WRPG	103.9	Warner Robins	GA	WVWI	1000	St. Thomas	VI
WDMG	860	Douglas	GA	WNNG	1350	Warner Robins	GA	WVOW	101.9	Logan	WV
WDMG	97.9	Douglas	GA	WDBN	107.5	Wrightsville	GA	WVOW	1290	Logan	WV
WMLT	1330	Dublin	GA	WHSY	950	Hattiesburg	MS				
WSGC	1400	Elberton	GA	WJDH	620	Jackson	MS				

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* All Friday, Saturday games and Opening Day.
** All Wednesday games in this level are 2-for-1.
*** All Tuesday games in this level are 2-for-1.
Parking: \$10 per car in advance, \$12 day of game.
\$40 per bus in advance, \$50 day of game.

PARKING PACKAGES

	PRICE	SAVINGS
Full Season	\$850	\$146
Half Season	\$430	\$74
Weekend	\$310	\$50
20-Game	\$200	\$40

MUSEUM & TOUR INFO

The Ivan Allen Jr. Braves Museum features more than 500 Braves artifacts that trace the team's history from its beginnings in Boston (1871-1952) to Milwaukee (1953-65) to Atlanta (1966-present). It is located on the northwest side of Turner Field at aisle 134. The museum opens two and a half hours before each game and closes in the middle of the seventh inning. The museum is open year-round and is the starting point of one-hour guided tours of Turner Field. Tours leave on the hour.

Tour reservations are not necessary for individuals or groups of less than 20 people. Tickets can be purchased the day of the tour at the main ticket window. Free parking in the Green lot.

Admission to the museum during games is one token (12) and 5 on non-game days. Tour tickets are 12 for adults, 7 for children and 10 for groups of 20 or more. Walk-up tickets can be purchased at the ticket window. Groups of 20 or more and school groups must make reservations two weeks in advance by calling (404) 614-2311.

HOURS OF OPERATION

APRIL - OCTOBER

Monday - Saturday
Sunday

9 a.m. - 3 p.m.
1 - 3 p.m.

OCTOBER - MARCH

Monday - Saturday

10 a.m. - 2 p.m.

DEC. 23-JAN. 3

CLOSED

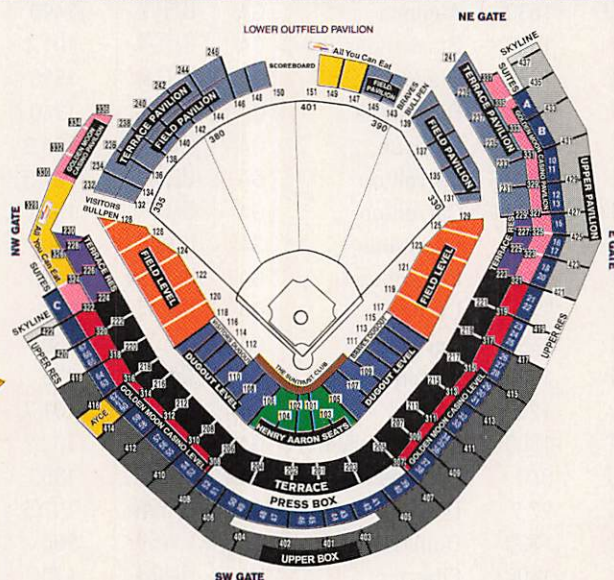
TOUR TICKETS

ADULTS	\$12
CHILDREN 13 and Under	\$7
MILITARY	\$7
GROUP	\$10

SCHOOL GROUP PRICES

CHILDREN	\$5
ADULTS	\$7

*Subject to change
Tours not available when the Braves have afternoon home games



TICKET SPECIALS

-  Coca-Cola 2-for-1 Tuesdays: Buy 1 Upper Reserved for \$8, get 1 Free.
-  MasterCard Grand Slam Pack: 4 Tickets, 4 hotdogs, 4 Cokes, parking and yearbook, starting at \$59.
-  McDonald's Outfield Advantage: Wednesdays, Buy 1 Outfield Pavilion for \$22, Get 1 Free.
-  College Discount: Show college ID at Turner Field ticket window to get 2 Upper Box tickets for the price of 1.
-  Military Discount: Show ID at Turner Field ticket window to get 2 Upper Box tickets for the price of 1.
-  Topps Thursdays: Present/surrender 1 Topps baseball card wrapper at Turner Field ticket window to receive 1 Free Outfield Pavilion ticket with the purchase of 1 ticket of equal/greater value.

* All ticket offers subject to availability. Seating restrictions may apply. Not to be combined with any other discount, promotion or coupon. No reservations or tickets by phone or outlet. Free ticket offers can only be transacted at Turner Field ticket office.

FULL SEASON

SECTION	PRICE	SAVINGS
Dugout	\$4,316	\$772
Terrace	\$2,490	\$606
Field	\$2,490	\$606
Club	\$2,822	\$440
Outfield Pavilion	\$996	\$938
Upper Box	\$830	\$274
Upper Pavilion	\$249	\$249
Terrace Reserved*	\$1,826	\$274
Club Pavilion*	\$2,158	\$274
All You Can Eat Outfield	\$2,905	\$965
All You Can Eat Club Pavilion	\$3,984	\$1,546

HALF SEASON

Section	Price	Savings
Field	\$1,344	\$276
Club	\$1,512	\$192
Outfield Pavilion	\$714	\$318
Upper Box	\$462	\$150

WEEKEND PACKAGE

Section	Price	Savings
Field	\$960	\$180
Club	\$1,080	\$120
Outfield Pavilion	\$510	\$210
Upper Box	\$330	\$90

20-GAME PLANS

Section	Price	Savings
Club	\$720	\$92
Field	\$640	\$132

APRIL EVENTS

April 2 vs. Pirates Baseball Card Team Sets (Upper Deck)
April 3 vs. Pirates Singles Night; College Night
April 4-5 vs. Mets Magnetic Schedules (Georgia Power)
April 4 vs. Mets Fireworks (Publix)
April 6 vs. Mets Alumni Meet & Greet
April 18 vs. Dodgers Latin Night; Fireworks (Publix)

April 19 vs. Dodgers Jackie Robinson Honorary Day
April 20 vs. Dodgers Alumni Meet & Greet
April 22 vs. Nationals 2-for-1 Tuesday (Coca-Cola)
April 23 vs. Marlins Bobby Cox Bobbleheads (Coca-Cola)
April 24 vs. Marlins Xtreme Adventure Night

4-GAME PACK

TERRACE LEVEL \$140

OUTFIELD PAVILION \$84

UPPER BOX \$44

OPENING DAY PACK
NL EAST FIREWORKS PACK
SATURDAY PACK
METS PACK
FRIDAY FIREWORKS PACK
WEST COAST PACK
SUNDAY PACK
BOBBLEHEAD GIVEAWAY PACK
NL CENTRAL PACK
HAT GIVEAWAY PACK
HOLIDAY WEEKEND PACK
T-SHIRT GIVEAWAY PACK

Mar. 31 (Pittsburgh)
 April 4 (Mets)
 April 5 (Mets)
 April 6
 April 18 (Dodgers)
 April 19 (Dodgers)
 April 20 (Dodgers)
 April 23 (Florida)
 May 3 (Cincinnati)
 May 7 (San Diego)
 May 25 (Arizona)
 June 4 (Florida)

May 20 (Mets)
 June 6 (Philadelphia)
 May 17 (Oakland)
 May 22
 May 23 (Arizona)
 May 24 (Arizona)
 June 22 (Seattle)
 May 21 (Mets)
 July 29 (St. Louis)
 July 30 (St. Louis)
 May 26 (Arizona)
 July 2 (Philadelphia)

July 31 (St. Louis)
 July 18 (Washington)
 Aug. 2 (Milwaukee)
 Sept. 20
 June 20 (Seattle)
 June 21 (Seattle)
 July 6 (Houston)
 June 25 (Milwaukee)
 Aug. 1 (Milwaukee)
 Aug. 26 (Florida)
 July 4 (Houston)
 Aug. 13 (Cubs)

Aug. 14 (Cubs).
 Sept. 19 (Mets).
 Sept. 6 (Washington).
 Sept. 21.
 Aug. 15 (San Francisco).
 Aug. 16 (San Francisco).
 Aug. 17 (San Francisco).
 Aug. 27 (Florida).
 Aug. 12 (Cubs).
 Sept. 17 (Philadelphia).
 July 5 (Houston).
 Sept. 10 (Colorado).



All games on WGST-AM [640], The Bull (94.9 FM), and Braves Network affiliates.



MARCH/APRIL

TURNER FIELD

AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
30 8:05 PM WSH OPENING DAY ESPN	31 7:10 PM PIT HOME OPENER PTV	1	2 7:10 PM PIT FSN	3 7:10 PM PIT SS	4 7:35 PM NYM PTV	5 3:55 PM NYM FOX
6 1:35 PM NYM SS	7 8:35 PM COL SS	8 8:35 PM COL SS	9 8:35 PM COL FSN	10 3:05 PM COL SS	11 7:35 PM WSH SS	12 1:05 PM WSH SS
13 1:35 PM WSH SS	14	15 7:10 PM FLA SS	16 7:10 PM FLA FSN	17 7:10 PM FLA SS	18 7:35 PM LAD PTV	19 3:55 PM LAD FOX
20 1:35 PM LAD SS/TBS	21 7:10 PM WSH SS	22 7:10 PM WSH SS	23 7:10 PM FLA FSN	24 7:10 PM FLA SS	25 7:10 PM NYM PTV	26 1:10 PM PM NYM SS
27 1:10 PM NYM SS	28	29 7:10 PM WSH SS	30 4:35 PM WSH FSN			

MAY

TURNER FIELD

AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
				1	2 7:35 PM CIN PTV	3 7:10 PM CIN PTV
4 1:35 PM CIN SS	5	6 7:10 PM SD SS	7 7:10 PM SD FSN	8 1:10 PM SD SS	9 7:05 PM PIT SS	10 7:05 PM PIT SS
11 1:35 PM PIT SS	12 12:35 PM PIT SS	13 7:05 PM PHI SS	14 7:05 PM PHI FSN	15 7:05 PM PHI SS	16 7:35 PM OAK PTV	17 7:10 PM OAK PTV
18 1:35 PM OAK SS	19	20 7:10 PM NYM SS	21 7:10 PM NYM FSN	22 7:10 PM NYM PTV	23 7:35 PM AZ PTV	24 3:55 PM AZ FOX
25 1:35 PM AZ SS	26 1:10 PM AZ SS	27 8:05 PM MIL SS	28 8:05 PM MIL FSN	29 1:05 PM MIL SS	30 7:10 PM CIN SS	31 3:55 PM PM CIN FOX

JUNE

TURNER FIELD

AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
1 1:15 PM CIN SS	2 7:10 PM FLA SS	3 7:10 PM FLA PTV	4 1:10 PM FLA PTV	5 7:10 PM FLA PTV	6 7:35 PM PHI PTV	7 7:10 PM PHI PTV
8 1:35 PM PHI SS	9	10 8:05 PM CHC PTV	11 8:05 PM CHC FSN	12 2:20 PM CHC PTV	13 10:05 PM LAA SS	14 9:05 PM LAA SS
15 TBD LAA SS	16	17 8:05 PM TX PTV	18 8:05 PM TX FSN	19 2:05 PM TX PTV	20 7:35 PM SEA PTV	21 7:10 PM SEA PTV
22 1:35 PM SEA SS	23 7:10 PM MIL FSN	24 7:10 PM MIL PTV	25 1:10 PM MIL PTV	26	27 7:07 PM TOR SS	28 1:07 PM PM TOR SS
29 1:07 PM TOR SS	30					

JULY

ALL-STAR GAME TURNER FIELD AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
		1 7:10 PM PHI PTV	2 7:10 PM PHI FSN	3 7:10 PM PHI PTV	4 7:35 PM HOU PTV	5 7:10 PM HOU PTV
6 1:35 PM HOU SS	7 10:10 PM LAD SS	8 10:10 PM LAD SS	9 10:10 PM LAD FSN	10	11 10:05 PM SD SS	12 10:05 PM SD SS
13 4:05 PM SD SS	14	15 8:00 PM ALL-STAR GAME YANKEE STADIUM	16	17	18 7:35 PM WSH PTV	19 7:10 PM WSH PTV
20 1:35 PM WSH SS	21 7:10 PM FLA SS	22 7:10 PM FLA SS	23 7:10 PM FLA FSN	24	25 7:05 PM PHI PTV	26 3:55 PM PHI FOX
27 1:35 PM PHI SS	28 7:10 PM STL SS	29 7:10 PM STL PTV	30 7:10 PM STL FSN	31 7:10 PM STL PTV		

AUGUST

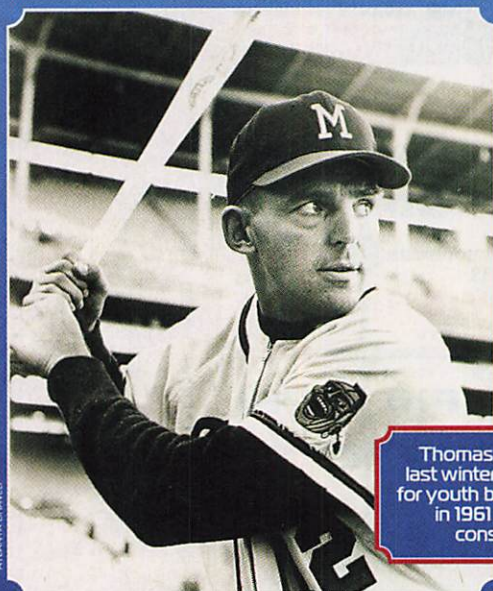
TURNER FIELD AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
					1 7:35 PM MIL PTV	2 3:55 PM MIL FOX
3 1:35 PM MIL SS	4 10:15 PM SF SS	5 10:15 PM SF SS	6 3:45 PM SF FSN	7 9:40 PM AZ SS	8 9:40 PM AZ SS	9 3:55 PM AZ FOX
10 4:10 PM AZ SS	11	12 7:10 PM CHC PTV	13 7:10 PM CHC FSN	14 7:10 PM CHC FSN	15 7:35 PM SF PTV	16 7:10 PM SF PTV
17 1:35 PM SF SS	18 4:35 PM SF SS	19 7:10 PM NYM PTV	20 7:10 PM NYM FSN	21 7:10 PM NYM PTV	22 8:15 PM STL SS	23 3:55 PM STL FOX
24 2:15 PM STL SS	25	26 7:10 PM FLA SS	27 7:10 PM FLA FSN	28 7:10 PM FLA SS	29 7:35 PM WSH SS	30 7:10 PM WSH SS
31 1:35 PM WSH SS						

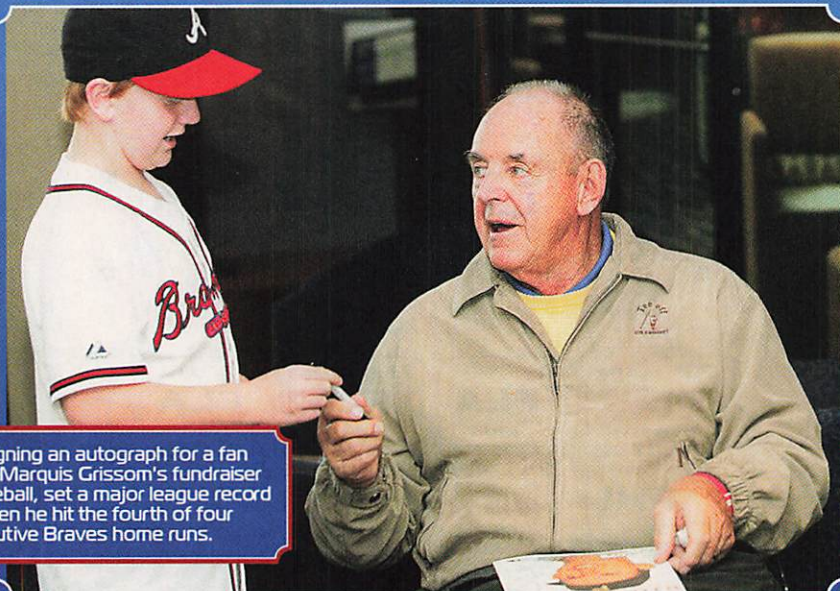
SEPTEMBER

TURNER FIELD AWAY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
TBD	1 1:10 PM FLA SS	2 7:10 PM FLA SS	3 1:10 PM FLA FSN	4 7:10 PM WSH FSN	5 7:35 PM WSH PTV	6 7:10 PM WSH SS
7 1:35 PM WSH SS	8	9 7:10 PM COL PTV	10 7:10 PM COL FSN	11 7:10 PM COL PTV	12 7:10 PM NYM ESPN	13 3:55 PM NYM FOX
14 1:10 PM NYM SS	15	16 7:10 PM PHI SS	17 7:10 PM PHI FSN	18 7:10 PM PHI PTV	19 7:35 PM NYM PTV	20 7:10 PM NYM SS
21 1:35 PM NYM SS	22 7:05 PM PHI PTV	23 7:05 PM PHI PTV	24 7:05 PM PHI FSN	25	26 8:05 PM HOU SS	27 7:05 PM HOU SS
28 2:05 PM HOU SS	29	30				



Thomas, signing an autograph for a fan last winter at Marquis Grissom's fundraiser for youth baseball, set a major league record in 1961 when he hit the fourth of four consecutive Braves home runs.



RECORD-SETTING SLUGGER

Frank Thomas, Who Hit Landmark Home Run in '61, Enjoys Helping Kids

BY JON COOPER

MARQUIS GRISSOM and Frank Thomas don't have an awful lot in common. They both played outfield for the Braves and both would have liked to stay with the team longer than they did, but that's about it.

In just two seasons as a Brave (1995-96), Grissom developed a great deal of popularity (he's best remembered for catching the final out of the 1995 Worlds Series). On the other hand, Thomas was a ship that passed in the night, playing parts of two seasons (1961, '65) with the Braves in Milwaukee.

In fact, Thomas played his final big league game on May 30, 1966, some 11 months before Grissom was born.

Yet the two have found common ground in helping children.

"I met Frank Thomas at a Toys for Tots event last year," recalled Grissom. "We were both sitting there signing [autographs], doing a good deed."

One good deed deserved another, and when Grissom hosted the inaugural Marquis Grissom Baseball Association Get In The Game Gala, Nov. 4 at Turner Field's 755 Club (Dec. '07 CT), he extended an invitation to Thomas.

"What a great guy," said Grissom, 41. "For him to come all the way from Pittsburgh to sign autographs and be a part of this is outstanding. Those kind of commitments are what I'm looking for for the kids. People like him really make this thing a success."

They may be generations apart, but Thomas recognizes dedication when he sees it.

"I think what Marquis is doing for the kids is just out of this world," said the 78-year-old Thomas, who lives in Pittsburgh, where he spent the bulk of his 16-year career, with his wife Dolores.

"He made an awful lot of money to where he could start something. He's out there participating, and that's what it's all about. If he decided that he was just going to put up money for it and not participate, then you're defeating the purpose of the whole thing."

Thomas has become as good at giving time to kids as he was at hitting baseballs out of the park as a slugger. He is active in the Pittsburgh area, but also has a good reason to go out on the road for causes like Toys for Tots.

"We have eight children - seven living and one deceased - we have 12 grandkids, step-grandkids, and now we have another granddaughter coming. Christmas is expensive," he said with a laugh. "I'm enjoying life. I've been out of baseball 41 years now and enjoying it. We go visit our kids. We have a daughter in Grand Junction, Colo., a son here in Marietta, Ga., then we have a son in Tampa, Fla., and the rest of the kids live in Pittsburgh."

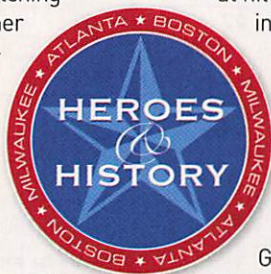
While Thomas briefly pursued a coaching career following his retirement from baseball, he found a more rewarding career path at the ICM School of Business in Pittsburgh, where he taught for 18 years.

At the Get In The Game Gala, Thomas was very much a father figure to the kids from Grissom's teams.

"I just told them that if you have a dream, don't let anyone deter you from that dream," he said. "In other words, listen and do the best that you can with the God-given talent given to you."

Thomas used that approach in the majors from 1951-66, when he hit 286 home runs, drove in 962 runs, and hit a respectable .266 with a .454 slugging percentage.

While his time with the Braves was brief (124 games in 1961 and 15 more in '65), he has pleasant memories of playing on pow-



erful teams that included Hank Aaron, Eddie Mathews, Del Crandall and Joe Torre.

His most pleasant Braves memory was easy to pick out. It took place June 8, 1961, at Cincinnati's old Crosley Field.

"We had the game where we hit the four home runs in succession," he recalled. "[Eddie] Mathews hit the first one, [Hank] Aaron hit the second one, [Joe] Adcock hit the third one, and I hit the fourth one. [Jim] Maloney pitched to Mathews and Aaron, and they brought in Marshall Bridges to pitch to Adcock and me."

Remarkably, the Braves lost the game, 10-8. They were trailing, 10-2, when the home run barrage took place in the seventh inning. The four straight home runs set a major league record that still stands, though it has been tied.

"It's a wonder we didn't win," added Thomas, who hit .284 with 25 homers and 67 RBIs with Milwaukee in just 423 at-bats that year. "Pitching was the bad part. The relief pitching wasn't as good, although we had Don McMahon. He did very well, but it was just one of those unfortunate things that happen in baseball. A team gets hot, then it cools down, and everybody seems to go into a slump at the same time."

The relief pitching may have conjured painful memories of the '61 Braves for Thomas, but getting to play with Hall of Famer Warren Spahn was a highlight.

"He was a great competitor," Thomas recalled. "When I played against him, he used to always talk to the hitters, and I used to talk to him. I'd always say, 'Get it up a little bit just so I can get the bat on the ball.'"

Thomas chuckled as he remembered finally getting his pound of flesh off Spahn.

"I drilled him one time when he was pitching against Pittsburgh," he recalled. "He had a big groove in his leg because the ball hit him and went all the way into the dugout. It was hit pretty hard."

"The last time I saw him was in New York at the B.A.T. (Baseball Assistance Team) dinner the year before he died, and he said, 'I'll never forget that. I was mad as [heck] because the ball went into the dugout and you got a double out of it.'"

The thrill Thomas gets from giving is matched by the thrill he gets talking about and watching baseball.

"I love baseball," said Thomas. "Baseball was my first love. My wife (of 57 years) knew that before we got married."

"I told her, 'Now that I'm out of baseball, you've moved up to No. 1,'" he added with a laugh.

HOW I MADE IT TO THE MAJORS

KEITH ADAMS
NATIONAL ANTHEM SINGER

BY STEVE FALL

THE BEST baseball players give 100 percent. Keith Adams brings that same intensity to singing "The Star Spangled Banner."

"I'm really into it. You can see it on my face," said Adams. "A lot of times, I'll use my fist at the end of the song. I might raise my hand, because I am absolutely into the song when I sing it."

Adams has been singing the national anthem at Braves games for 17 years, and has become a fan favorite at Atlanta sporting events. When the NHL's Atlanta Thrashers played their first home playoff game ever in 2007, they selected him to sing the anthem.

Adams arrives about one hour before he performs at Turner Field. He'll practice the song at least two to three times before taking the field. While he has sung the anthem at hundreds of sporting events, Adams admits that he still gets nervous on occasion.

"If the Braves are in the playoffs, obviously that's a little bit more nerve-racking," he said. "That emotional drive gets under my skin. Or if it's a packed house, it just brings up the intensity of the song."

Born in Nashville, Adams grew up a Braves fan when watching teams led by Dale Murphy. He began singing in church at age nine. He moved to Atlanta when in middle school, and first learned to perform the national anthem in high school. He attended the DeKalb Center for the Performing Arts, where he honed his singing and acting skills.

He first considered singing at a sporting event while attending a Braves game. He then sent the club a CD of his national anthem rendition, and they liked what they heard.

"From that point, they called me and had a mass audition. They were so impressed that they wanted me to do several games," said Adams.

He now performs the song from two to four times each year at Turner Field. In addition to performing at Thrashers and Atlanta Hawks (NBA) games, he also sings for the NHL's Nashville Predators.

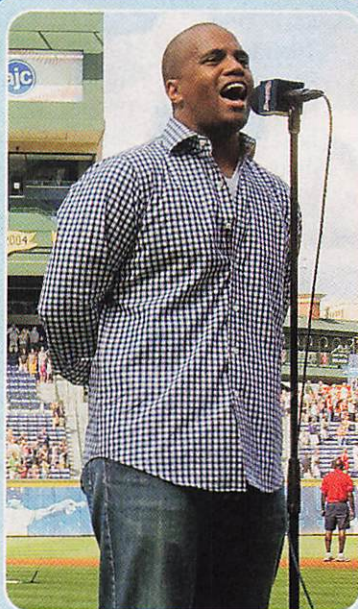
During his professional singing career, Adams has performed mostly gospel music. He's also sung backup for recording artists including Alicia Keys and acted in shows in New York City.

The 38-year-old Adams offered advice for individuals that would like to sing the national anthem at major league ballgames.

"Believe the lyrics that you're singing, and that's going to come across," he said. "If this is something that you want to do, when you send in a CD, make it believable."

Adams does not alter the national anthem in any way.

"I use a very conservative way of singing that song," he said, "because I think it should be sung with honor. I don't think it needs my own personal touch. That's one song that you're singing not for yourself, but for everyone who's listening to it and what it means for Americans. So I think it should be sung with a lot of respect."



ALUMNI NOTES

The Milwaukee Braves Historical Association will honor **Bobby Thomson** (OF, 1954-57) May 15 at Potawatomi Bingo Casino's Northern Lights Theater. Only 300 tickets are being sold at \$125 each. Also on the program is **Andy Pafko** (OF, 1953-59). To order tickets, send a \$125 check payable to the MBHA and addressed to Tom Kaminski (treasurer), 2614 E. Bottsford Ave., St. Francis, Wis. 53235. All attendees will receive a baseball autographed by Thomson. The reception and dinner begin at 6 p.m. (Central). Thomson also will be introduced at Miller Park before that afternoon's Dodgers-Brewers game. Visit milwaukeebraveshistoricalassociation.com for more information.

Thomson hit one of the most-famous home runs in history, the "Shot Heard 'Round the World" to win the 1951 NL pennant for the New York Giants. Pafko was the Dodgers' leftfielder who saw that home run sail over the fence. Thomson was a solid outfielder for the Braves, but is best remembered for breaking his ankle in spring training 1954, shortly after he was acquired by Milwaukee. The Braves were forced to replace him in the lineup with a 20-year-old rookie named **Hank Aaron**, who had less than two years of pro experience.

Joe Torre (C/1B, 1960-68; Mgr. 1982-84), now manager of the Dodgers, was appointed to the President's Cancer Panel for a term that runs through Feb. 2011.

Cubs second baseman **Mark DeRosa** (INF, 1998-2004) experienced a rapid heartbeat Feb. 23 in spring training and was taken to the hospital. On Feb. 28, a cardiologist performed a procedure to correct the problem, and DeRosa returned to Cactus League game action Mar. 10.

Don Baylor (Coach, 1999) was a guest instructor in Angels training camp.

Seattle released **Horacio Ramirez** (LHP, 2003-06) on Mar. 12.

John Ennis (RHP, 2002) was designated for assignment by Philadelphia Feb. 27 and accepted a minor league contract with the team Mar. 1.

The Dodgers released **Tom Martin** (LHP, 2004-05) Mar. 10.

Bret Boone (2B, 1999) signed a minor league contract with Washington.

Washington signed **Odalys Perez** (LHP, 1998-2001) to a minor league contract.

The Eau Claire (Wis.) Baseball History Committee is planning to recognize all of the individuals who made significant contributions to baseball in Eau Claire by forming a Baseball Hall of Fame. It was decided to enhance the **Hank Aaron** Plaza, adjacent to the Carson Park Baseball Stadium, which currently features a statue of Aaron, with plaques and other forms of recognition. Aaron (OF/1B, 1954-74) began his pro career with Eau Claire in 1952.

Darrel Chaney (INF, 1976-79) is co-chair of the sixth annual Celebrity Golf Tournament scheduled April 15 at Innsbruck Resort & Golf Club in Helen, Ga., to benefit United Way. Among the celebrities expected to participate is **Phil Niekro** (RHP, 1964-83, '87). The entry fee is \$150 per player and \$150 per sponsor hole sign. For more information, call (706) 865-3151 or e-mail: bill_sutton@ucbi.com. Spectators can watch the tournament at no charge. Attendance at the reception and banquet is \$40 per person. The pre-tournament reception and silent auction are April 14 at Bigg Daddy's in Helen. After the tournament, there is a reception and banquet at the Remember When Theater in Helen.

Craig Wilson (1B, 2007) signed a minor league contract with Cincinnati Feb. 9 but was released Feb. 22 due to continued shoulder problems.

Tom Reynolds, former co-owner of the Braves who was instrumental in moving the franchise from Milwaukee to Atlanta in 1966, died Feb. 14 at age 79.

BIRTHDAYS

APRIL

1 ST	RED MURFF (87) PHIL NIEKRO (69) WILLIE MONTANEZ (60)
2 ND	BILLY SAMPLE (53)
3 RD	ALEX GRAMMAS (81) HAWK TAYLOR (69) MARTY CLARY (46) QUILVIO VERAS (37)
4 TH	BRAD KOMMINSK (47)
5 TH	HAL SCHACKER (83) TOMMY GREENE (41) BRET BOONE (39)
10 TH	FRANK LARY (78) BOB WATSON (62) LEE LACY (60) PETE VARNEY (59) KEN GRIFFEY (58) MIKE DEVEREAUX (45) MARVIN FREEMAN (45)
11 TH	SEAN BERGMAN (38) MARK TEIXEIRA (28)
12 TH	JOHNNY ANTONELLI (78) JOSE ALVAREZ (52)
14 TH	MARTY KEOUGH (73) JAY ALDRICH (47) DAVID JUSTICE (42) GREG MADDUX (42) GREG MYERS (42) STEVE AVERY (38) KYLE FARNSWORTH (32)
17 TH	MARQUIS GRISSOM (41)
18 TH	RON SCHUELER (60) RICO BROGNA (38)
19 TH	SCOTT KAMIENIECKI (44)
20 TH	TODD HOLLANDSWORTH (35)
22 ND	MICKEY VERNON (90) MIKE BELL (40)
23 RD	ANDRUW JONES (31)
24 TH	IVAN MURRELL (63) BOB BEALL (60) CHIPPER JONES (36) WILL CUNNANE (34)
25 TH	BOB JOHNSON (65) LEW KRAUSSE (65) DARREN HOLMES (42) BRAD CLONTZ (37)
28 TH	PABLO TORREALBA (60) JORGE SOSA (30)
29 TH	ART KENNEY (92) TOM HOUSE (61)
30 TH	BOB HENDLEY (69)

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BACK TO BACK

THERE'S A GLARING omission you should be aware of on the Braves' promotional calendar. They included the Friday night fireworks, but omitted the Saturday through Thursday fireworks.

That's right... Fireworks *every* night in 2008!

The pyrotechnics are compliments of Publix on Fridays and compliments of Chipper Jones and Mark Teixeira on the other nights. Chipper and Tex won't need to write a check. Payment will be taken from the hides of visiting pitchers.

Few things go together as well as baseball and fireworks, and Braves fans are going to get plenty of that extravaganza when opposing pitchers are forced to pick their poison.

Brace yourselves. This is going to be something special.

Seldom - if ever - in history have two power-hitting switch-hitters the caliber of Chipper and Teixeira batted back-to-back in the middle of a lineup. They gave a preview of what they could do last year, Chipper nearly winning the batting title before losing it on the last day of the season and Teixeira driving in 56 runs in 54 games as a Brave.

If you don't think every pitching staff that faces the Braves this year isn't already sweating bullets at the prospect of surviving this terrifying tandem, think again.

"It's a huge advantage to be a switch-hitter," said Frank Wren. "It puts the other team at such a disadvantage, especially when the game is on the line and they're trying to match up their pitchers. They try to weaken a player by bringing in a lefty to pitch to a lefty or a righthander to pitch to a right-handed batter. But when the two leading hitters on the team can't be pitched to because they're switch-hitters, it makes it very difficult to manage the other team."

Why? Those who have played baseball and tried to hit a breaking ball know the answer. For those who haven't, think about the degree of difficulty of trying to hit a ball breaking away from you compared to one that's breaking into your hitting zone. There really is no compari-

son - which is why just about every hitter would like to be a switch-hitter if he could master it.

But most can't. And few who do master it to the degree of Tex and Chipper can do it with power.

Heck, most of us can't even eat with the other hand (well, not with utensils anyway). How tough must it be to hit major league pitching with both hands!

Here's how tough it is. In the history of baseball, there have been just 15 instances when a switch-hitter batted .300 in a season and also had 30 home runs, 100 RBIs and 100 runs scored. Chipper has done it *five* times - one-third of those instances - and missed a sixth last year by one home run. Teixeira accomplished it in 2005 and fell short only in the runs scored department (86) last year when he missed a month with injury.

In the history of baseball, the power-hitting switch-hitters who've been able to sustain greatness over 10 or more years can be counted on one hand. Really, there's legendary Mickey Mantle, Hall of Famer Eddie Murray, and Chipper. Teixeira turns 28 this month. This is just his sixth season in the majors. He'll be in this group before long.

Let the fireworks begin!

THE SINGLE BIGGEST Braves-related issue on the minds of many fans is not how the Braves will do this year, but rather how fans will receive the games. Specifically, fans in the Braves' five-and-a-half-state Southeast region want to know if they will be able to watch the 45 games scheduled to be shown by Peachtree TV in metro Atlanta.

At press time, we did not have complete details, however a Peachtree TV spokesperson said these games *will* be available in the Braves region. All Comcast and Mediacom customers will receive the games, as well as Cox customers in Macon. Watch for more details in the May ChopTalk.

THIS ISSUE OF CHOPTALK was mailed Mar. 20. The May issue will be mailed April 22.



VROOM! VROOM!



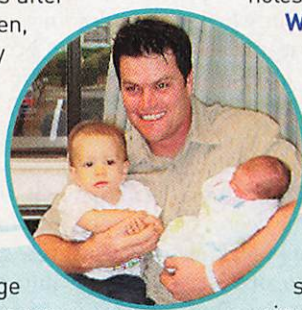
PHOTOS: ALLISON SHREFFTS

MIKE HAMPTON (L) and **Tim Hudson** (R and below) spent a couple of hours at the Richard Petty Driving Experience at the Walt Disney World Speedway after the Feb. 22 workout. The pitchers drove 600-horsepower NASCAR style stock cars around the 1-mile track at speeds up to 125 mph. It's no surprise that both said they would've liked to drive faster!



CONGRATULATIONS to **Matt** (below) and **Leslee Diaz** on the Feb. 26 birth of their daughter, **Anna Grace**. The Diazes have a 1-year-old son, **Nathan**. Leslee bravely hosted a 30th birthday party for Matt just five days after Anna was born, at their home in Winter Haven, Fla., on Mar. 2. The party was well-attended by many of Matt's teammates.

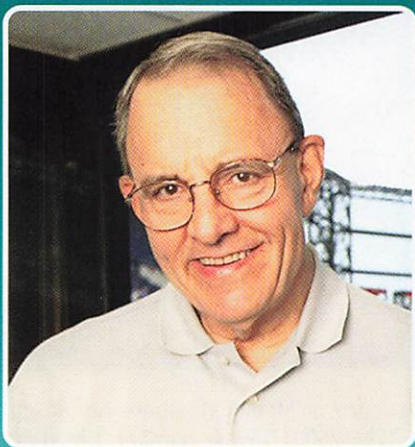
A major Ping Pong challenge took place at **Buddy Carlyle's** spring training residence on Feb. 20. Among the players were Carlyle, **John Smoltz**, **Will Ohman**, **Royce Ring**, **Ryan Drese**, **Brian McCann** and **Jeff Francoeur**. Although Smoltz was declared the winner of the "double elimination college world series-styled event," Carlyle said Ring gave Smoltz a run for his money. "In fact, seven times out of 10, I'd say Ring will beat Smoltz," said Carlyle. "From what I've



SPECIAL

heard, [Smoltz] likes to hit Ping Pong balls against the wall, Forrest Gump style. It's pretty sad."...

John Smoltz, **Tom Glavine** and **Jeff Francoeur** played 18 holes with Smoltz's buddy, PGA superstar **Tiger Woods**, Mar. 3 at Isleworth Golf & Country Club, Woods' home course near Orlando. Francoeur boldly attempted to out-drive Woods on the first few holes before finally settling down. Naturally, Woods won the round, even though Smoltz is a scratch golfer. But turn about was fair play two days later when Woods showed up at Champion Stadium at Disney's Wide World of Sports, the Braves' spring training home, to bat against Smoltz in a simulated game on one of the back fields. Woods struck out twice, drew a walk, and finally got a shaky dribbler through the infield for a "hit."...



SKIP ON D.L.

BRAVES Hall of Fame broadcaster and long-time ChopTalk columnist **Skip Caray**, who missed spring training for the first time in 33 years, is recovering from a health setback and was unable to start the season in the radio booth. He hopes to resume broadcasting games on the Braves Radio Network very soon and thanks all the fans for their good thoughts and wishes. Caray, 68, has been a fixture in the Braves' booth for the last 32 years.

year, her team raised \$7,825...

The night after he was inducted into the Central Florida Sports Hall of Fame, **Chipper Jones** and his golfing buddy, **Carter Smith**, returned to the Amway Arena for the Rascal Flatts concert. Also attending the concert were **Chuck** and **Julie James**, **Brian McCann**, and the players' agent, **B.B. Abbott**. The group scored backstage passes to visit with the band before and after the show...

Brian McCann celebrated his 24th birthday on Feb. 20, by playing a round of golf with **Mike Hampton**. Later that evening, Hampton enjoyed dinner at Café d'Antonio in Celebration, Fla., with Houston catcher **Brad Ausmus**, a friend from his Astros days...

Kelly Johnson and his wife, **Lauren**, celebrated his 26th birthday on Feb. 22, with dinner at McCormick & Schmick's, then lis-

Tim and **Kim Hudson** hosted their annual "Birdies & Baseball" Celebrity Golf Tournament at ChampionsGate National Course near Orlando on Feb. 25. The tournament benefits the AFLAC Cancer Center at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. At the draw party, held at the JW Marriott Grand Lakes the night before, John Smoltz was the first "celebrity" golfer to be chosen, **Jeff Francoeur** was second, and Hudson, was selected third. Other players participating included **Tom Glavine**, **Chipper Jones**, **Mike Hampton**, **Brian McCann**, **Mark Teixeira**, **Kelly Johnson**, **Tyler Yates**, **Anthony Lerew**, **Jeff Ridgway**, **Phil Stockman**, **Royce Ring**, **Brent Lillibridge**, **Corky Miller**, **Clint Sammons** and **Peter Moylan**. Syndicated radio host **Neal Boortz** also played in the tournament. Smoltz and his foursome won the event that raised approximately \$80,000 for CHOA...

Country Fastball, a weekly, two-hour radio program featuring country music and conversations with some of the biggest names in baseball, counts **Tim Hudson** as one of its investors. **Robert Buan**, a broadcaster with the Oakland A's and the show's developer and host, approached Hudson about helping finance the project two years ago. The show is syndicated on several stations in California and Nevada and can also be heard via web-streaming on Sunday nights at 9 o'clock (Eastern), at countryfastball.com...

Kim Hudson and a group of other Braves wives and friends will participate in the 4th Annual Walk for Wishes, benefiting the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Georgia and Alabama. The walk will take place on April 19 at Atlantic Station in Midtown Atlanta. Kim's goal is to raise \$10,000. Last



THE GODFATHER

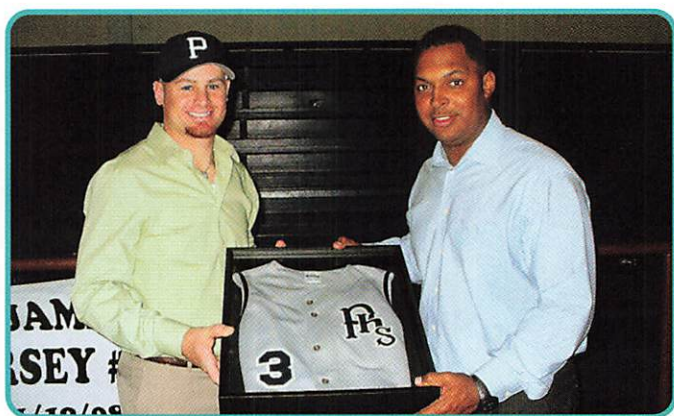
CHIPPER JONES (above, R) was inducted into the Central Florida Sports Hall of Fame at a ceremony held Feb. 20 at the Amway Arena in Orlando. Jones was part of an induction class that included NBA Orlando Magic player **Nick Anderson**, sportscaster **Pat Clarke**, and Stetson University baseball coach **Pete Dunn** (above, L). "It's always nice when

you're given an honor by the people who saw you growing up," said Jones. That was especially true of Dunn, who is a long-time friend of the Jones family and the third baseman's godfather. Dunn and Chipper's dad, Larry, played ball against each other as kids, went to Stetson together, then coached together.

tened to music at Blue Martini, an Orlando nightclub. Johnson said he received some much-needed "dress clothes" for his birthday. Here's a fun fact about Johnson shared by his long-time friend **Blaine Boyer**. "In high school, Kelly had earrings, long hair and listened to [alternative-rock band] Weezer," said Boyer. "**Adam Wainwright** (former Braves farmhand now pitching for St. Louis) and I took him under our wing. He's now a member of 'prep nation.'..."

Tyler and **Liesel Yates** will lend their support to the April 28 Kroger ALS Golf Challenge to defeat Lou Gehrig's disease. Though the Braves will be out of town that day, Liesel will work at the event registration, and the couple has supplied a variety of sports memorabilia for the event auction. The tournament will be held at the Country Club of the South, starting with an 11 a.m. shotgun start golf tournament and culminating with an awards dinner at 5 p.m. Former Braves expected to take part in the event include **Charlie Leibrandt** and **Zane Smith**. At press time, foursomes were still available. For information about registering a foursome or playing as an individual golfer, contact **Emily Deloach** at (404) 636-9909 or at emily@alsaga.org...

Chuck James' uniform number (6) was retired by Pebblebrook



High, in the Atlanta suburb of Mableton, where he played high school baseball from 1996-2000. "I wore number 3 my first year and then wore number 6 through the rest of high school and college," said James, who wears No. 36 with the Braves, combining the two numbers he wore in high school. He was presented a game-worn No. 3 (above) by coach Todd Harris at a fundraising event Feb. 5...

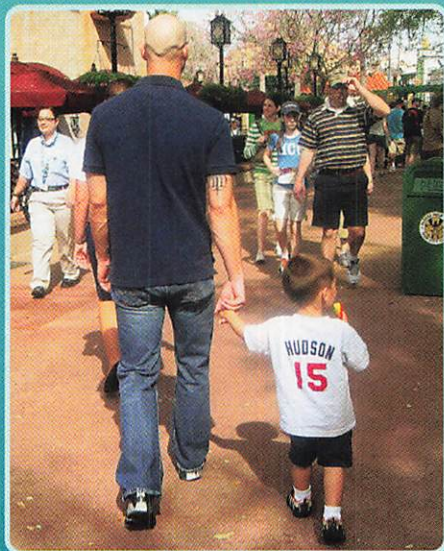
A simple miscommunication almost caused disaster when the beautiful blue Shelby Cobra (July '07 CT) James brought to spring training in a trailer was towed, without being tied down, to an impound lot 30 miles from his spring training home. "I was afraid to look in the trailer when we got to the lot, but there wasn't a scratch on it," said James...

Jeff Francoeur and **Brad Hainje**, Braves director of media relations and admitted NASA geek, managed to see the space shuttle Atlantis as it made its way to the landing site in nearby Cocoa Beach on Feb. 20. A double sonic boom was heard at 9:06 a.m. as the shuttle re-entered the earth's atmosphere...

Jo-Jo Reyes got married in January to his wife, **Jamie**. They are expecting their first child in mid-September...

Howie and **Sherry McCann**, parents of **Brian McCann**, made a trip to Orlando for the start of spring training games. The McCanns will attend the season opener between the Braves and Nationals on Mar. 30 at new Nationals Park in Washington, D.C...

Shawn Murphy (Nov. '06 CT), 25, an offensive lineman at Utah State and son of Braves Hall of Famer **Dale Murphy**, is hoping to make it to the NFL. The senior is considered one of the top 20 guards in the 2008 draft and had two interviews with the Miami Dolphins. A scouting report from The Sporting News said of Murphy, "He is an aggressive blocker whose best football is clearly ahead of him; don't be surprised when he outperforms many of the guards drafted before him."



The Hudsons do Disney: (clockwise from left) Tim and Kade take a stroll, Kim and Kade ride the teacups, and Tess and Kennedie with Mickey.

DISNEYPHILES

THE HUDSON family took full advantage of proximity to Disney World during spring training, making several trips to the Magic Kingdom, both with visiting friends and family, including Kim's parents **Harold** and **Debbie Bruner**. On one

trip, the family visited Disney's Hollywood Studios, formerly known as Disney's MGM Studios, where **Tess Hudson**, 4, was invited on stage to join the cast of High School Musical. "She was in heaven," said Kim.



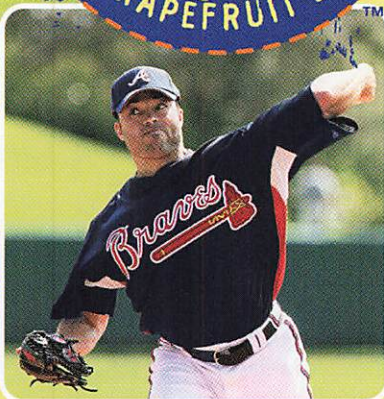
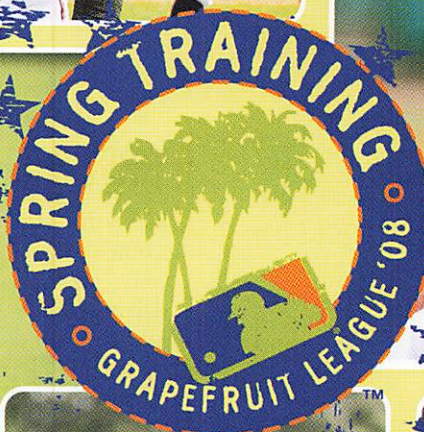
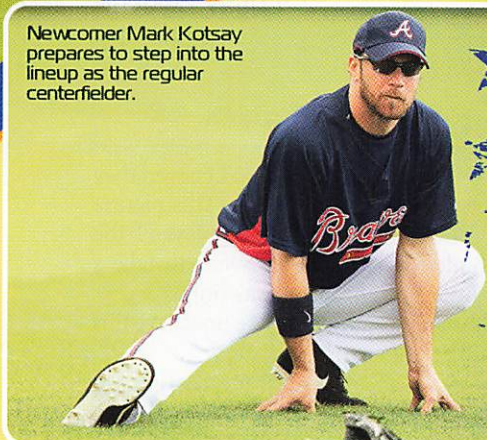
Boyhood buddies in Cuba, Brayan Pena (L) and Yunel Escobar beat the odds to become major league teammates in the U.S.

Between them, Tom Glavine (L) and John Smoltz have 1,371 games of regular season experience in the majors.



PHOTOS: ALISTON SHIFFERIS

Newcomer Mark Kotsay prepares to step into the lineup as the regular centerfielder.



Mike Hampton (above) shows his arm is cooperating in a comeback bid, and Chipper Jones (below) ponders another run at a batting title.

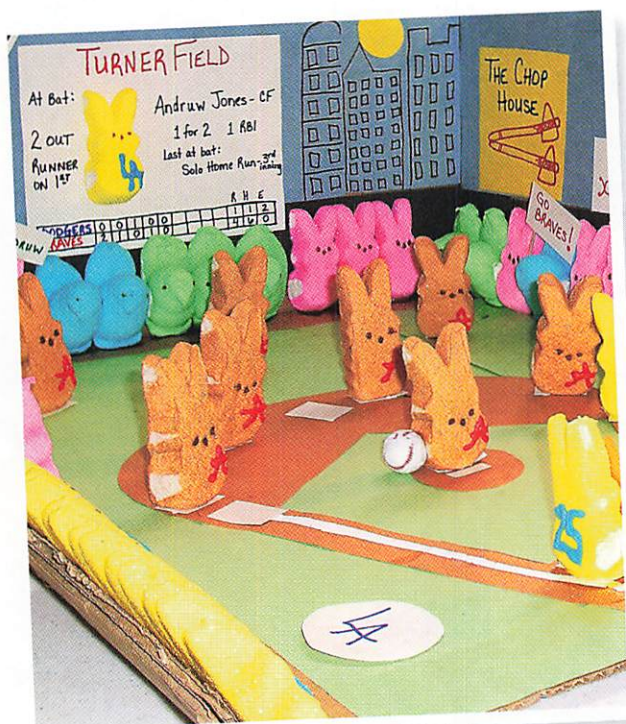


Mark Teixeira prepares for a day of work at Disney's Wide World of Sports complex.



Javy Lopez, who hit a home run in his first Grapefruit League at-bat, seems to be enjoying wearing a tomahawk across his chest again.

WHETHER YOU'RE HAVING FUN AT TURNER FIELD, EXPERIENCING A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH YOUR FAVORITE BRAVES PLAYER, OR JUST SHOWING OFF YOUR COLLECTION OF BRAVES STUFF OR TRYING ON YOUR NEW BRAVES SHIRT, WE WANT TO HEAR ABOUT IT AND SEE A PICTURE.



PEEP BALL

I am a sixth-grade teacher at ER Hughes Elementary School in New Hartford, N.Y. In order to stave off boredom in my students over February break, I held a Peeps diorama contest. This is a picture of the diorama I made of Turner Field. You'll notice that the Braves are playing the Dodgers, with my favorite ex-Brave, Andrew Jones, at bat. Of course, the Braves are winning, 4-1, behind a dominating pitching performance from John Smoltz. Go Braves!

CHERYL MARTIN
Rome, N.Y.

FIRST GAME

My husband is an avid Braves fan! Whenever they come out west, we always try to go watch. This picture was taken in Phoenix when they played the Diamondbacks. Buddy Carlyle was so sweet to take a picture with our little Carter. Carter was only 5 weeks old at this, his first major league game. We now have this picture framed in his room above his crib.

JESSICA BRUNSON
Las Vegas

MEETING THE STARS

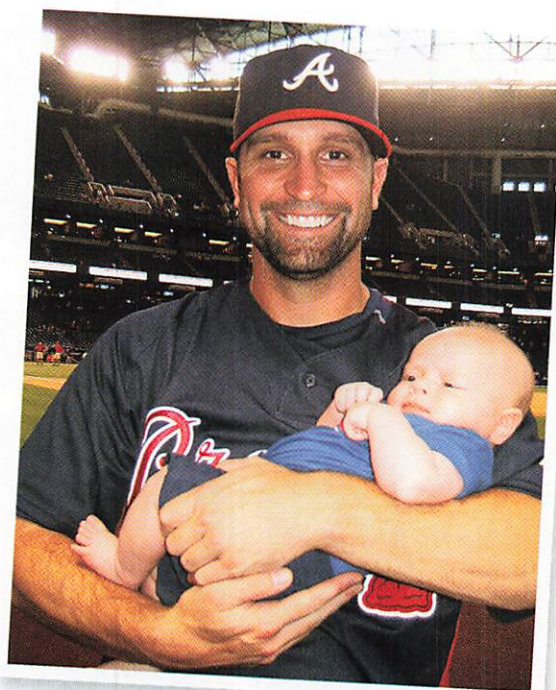
Our entire family is excited about the upcoming season. Thanks to ChopTalk, we keep up with the Braves year around. My daughter, Kate, is 4 1/2 years old and loves watching the Braves. During the off-season, she had the opportunity to meet her two favorite players, Brian McCann and Kelly Johnson. They couldn't have been kinder to Kate and are a perfect example of why the Braves are a first-class organization. She received their autograph and pictures that she proudly displays in her room. Thanks, Brian and Kelly. You acquired a life-long fan!

TRENT SHEMWELL
Alpharetta, Ga.

TOM TERRIFIC

It was such a wonderful November! I'm so excited to have Tom Glavine back where he belongs. He is one of the nicest people. He always takes time for people and is so gracious. Plus his wife, Chris, does so much for the community. Welcome home to the whole Glavine family!

GAYLE CASTLEBERRY
Nashville, Ark.



CHOPTALK AND THE ATLANTA BRAVES SUPPORT OUR TROOPS

LIKE FATHER... ✉

We are from Georgia but now live in Fort Worth, Texas. Here's a photo taken on our way to watch the Braves play the Texas Rangers. My son, Stephen, and grandson, Nathan, support their favorite player, Chipper Jones, complete with jersey and tomahawk. We usually have to go to Houston to catch a game but are excited that again the Braves will be here to play the Rangers this year. There are quite a few Atlanta fans in this area. All over the stadium, fans chant and do the tomahawk chop.

JANICE THOMPSON
Ft. Worth, Tex.

SIGN 'EM UP ✉

I am a Braves fan because of the players' willingness to sign autographs. Here is just one story of the many I have. It starts with John Smoltz signing a bat for me at his Strike Out Hunger drive. That means someone got a free meal because John gave his time. Then I took the same bat and got Tom Glavine to sign it at a Toys For Tots drive. Who knows how many kids got a Christmas gift because Tom gave his time? So, here's a big "high five" to Mr. Smoltz and Mr. Glavine.

TERRY FLYNN
Duluth, Ga.



SHARE YOUR BRAVES FEVER! ✉

WRITE TO US ✉



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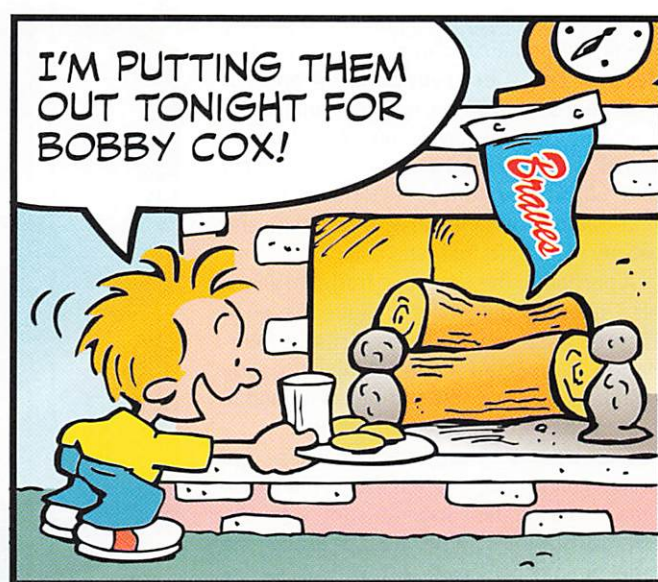
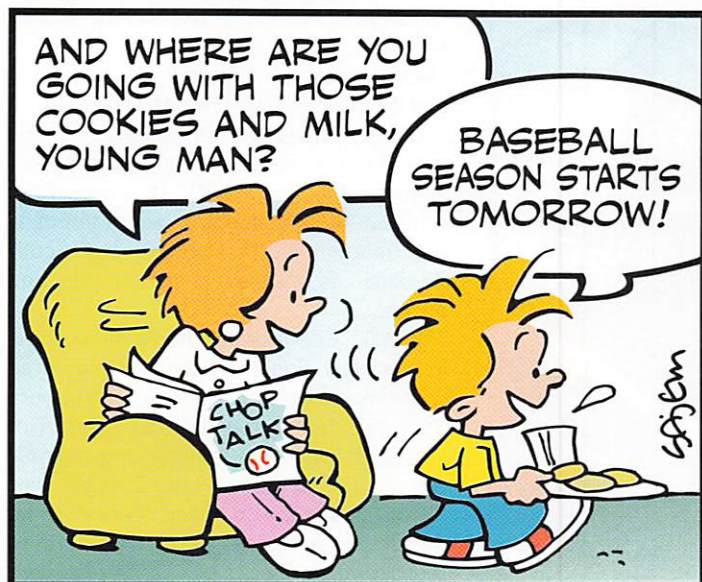
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'TIS THE SEASON



XTRA INNINGS

CHEERS TO DAYS OF WINE AND BASEBALL

BY PATTY RASMUSSEN

LIKE FINE WINES, some ballplayers get better with age.

Tom Glavine notched his 300th win last August at the ripe ol' age of 41. Chipper Jones had a near MVP season and was in the chase for a batting title in 2007 at age 35. And at age 24, two-time All-Star Brian McCann continued to show all the signs of having a sparkling career that should get even better in coming seasons.

This year, all three players are loaning their names and likenesses to three distinctive wine labels for the purpose of benefiting their personally selected charities.

Cabernet Glavington, a red wine, will benefit CURE Children's Cancer, a favorite Glavine charity that seeks to conquer childhood cancer through research, education and support of patients and their families. Glavington is described as, "Aromas of warm blackberry cobbler with currant, black plum, fresh earth, herb, cedar and a hint of anise. Flavors of black cherry, blackberry, plum, mocha, spice and mineral with rips, firm tannin on the finish."

Chipper Chardonnay, a white, will send the proceeds to The Miracle League, an organization creating ballparks and baseball leagues for disabled children. It is said to, "Open with strong aromas of freshly cut green apple, melon and pear. A bowl full of tropical fruit salad [pineapples, bananas, mangos and papaya] is in there, as well as a hint of floral apple blossom."

McCann Merlot, another red wine, will support The Rally Foundation, providing funds for pediatric cancer research. It is described as, "Deep ruby purple. Aromas of ripe plums, smoky berry fruits and spice. Juicy red currant flavors on the entry, followed with rich, red cherry, black cherry and blackberry flavors extending to the mid-palate. A long finish with spicy oak and velvety fruit. Soft, lush and colorful!"

A portion of the proceeds from the wines also goes to the Major League Baseball Player's Association Player's Trust, a foundation supported by all Major League ballplayers to promote volunteerism and to give to charitable causes worldwide.

The use of ballplayer's names and images on products for charity is not a new idea. During his original stint with the Braves, Glavine's name and face graced the label of an especially tasty marinara sauce,



All profits from wine sales benefit charities, and prints of the label artwork, some of it signed by the players, will be put on sale at a later date.

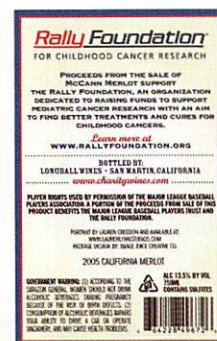


also for charity.

"It's a no-brainer," said Glavine, of the concept. "It's an easy way to get money for my charity. Of course, it helps if it's a good product, too!"

Charity Wines is the philanthropic division of a Massachusetts based company, VinLozano Imports Inc. The company created Longball Cellars with the goal of pairing fine wine with athletes' charities, and this year, over 30 pro athletes in baseball, football and hockey will have their own label.

The wines come from the Clos LaChance Winery & Estate Vineyard, located California's Napa Valley. The artwork for the Braves players' labels was created by Lauren Creedon, a student at Harvard University and a Chipper Jones fan, as well. About 1,500 prints of each illustration will



be sold, including a limited number of signed player proofs and artist's proofs.

Advance ordering for the wines at \$13.99 per bottle is underway at charitywines.com. There is a minimum order of six bottles, and it's permissible to mix and match.

Charity Wines will officially launch the sale of the Braves players' line at an event at Turner Field on May 19. They expect the wine will be available at retailers throughout Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina, as well as at restaurants and online.

In 2007, Charity Wines had great success in the New England area offering three wines featuring Boston Red Sox players Curt Schilling, David Ortiz and Tim Wakefield. The final tally on proceeds for the Red Sox wines alone was over \$325,000, and the company is hopeful that the Braves wines can do as well for their respective charities.

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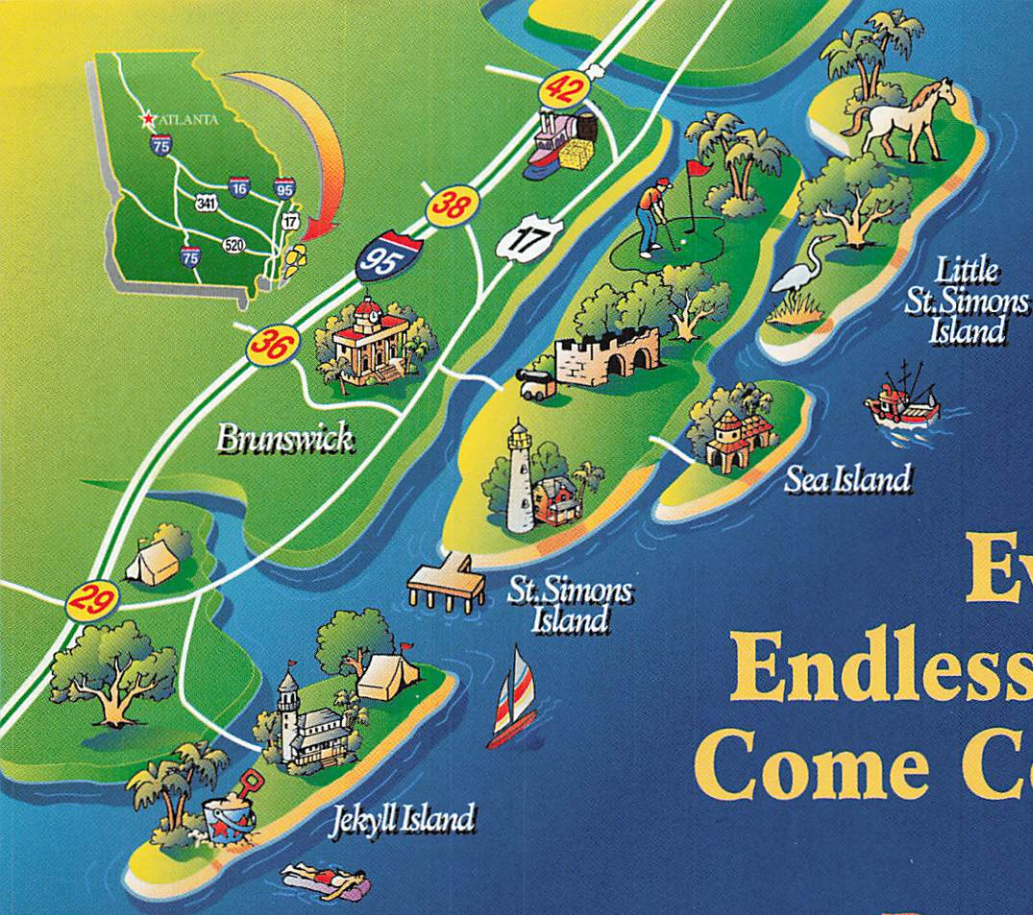
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